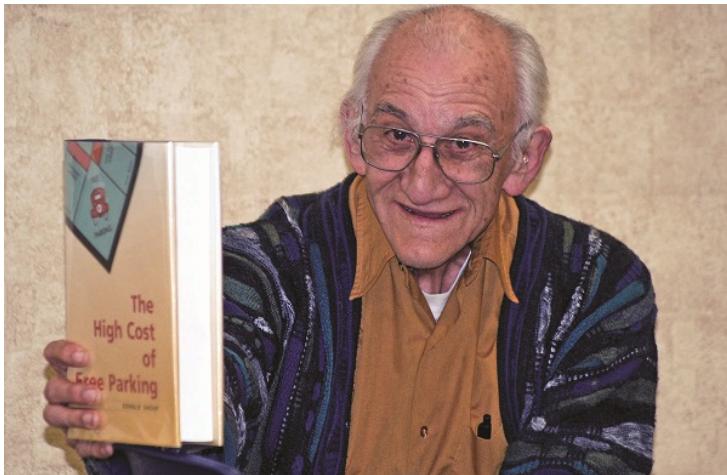


Old library should make way for new community use, say residents



By Brock Weir

Aurora's old public library building should come down, according to residents.

That was the overwhelming consensus of the attendees filling the Victoria Street landmark on Thursday in their second shot at pitching on what to do with Library Square.

In the discussions, which were led by Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, not one member of the 20-strong public who turned up were in favour of retaining the 50-year-old building, or the adjacent former home of the Aurora Seniors' Centre, now home to Blue Balloon.

While tearing down these two buildings in Library Square, which also houses the Aurora Cultural Centre and Victoria Hall, was unanimous, three clear ideas on what to replace them with also emerged at the top: replace the buildings with a new multi-storey, multi-use building; raze the buildings and put in a parking lot to accommodate already limited parking in the area; and, predominantly, a combination of both.

Speaking in favour of a new building to replace the old was Councillor Evelyn Buck, who has long promoted her vision for a multi-storey building of studios that would be a 'destination' for local artists.

'People need to know we have \$30 million in the bank in the reserve fund, which a previous Council decided should not be frittered away,' said Councillor Buck of the proceeds collected from the sale of Aurora Hydro. 'It should be used to replace Hydro, which was a very practical asset and we should replace it with an asset that would be equally valuable to the people who live in the community.'

'I visualized [studio space] as something like the TV-series 'Fame', where the lights are on from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. and people of every age are coming and going from this building all day and it is a true people place in the Town of Aurora. We need to stretch our minds, stretch our imagination, and stretch our dreams.'

A new multipurpose building captured the attention of most of the people in the room, but other ideas were ventured. One was a performing arts centre, a public piazza, an information centre, and a potential home for the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

Whatever ultimately replaces the building should have the same 'dynamism' of what is there already, they added. The old public library currently houses community groups, such as the Aurora Bridge Club, a group which was well represented at Thursday's

meeting, provides a home for the Aurora Air Cadets, as well as artistic and children's groups.

For many, it was a matter of striking a balance between all these community interests and having a long-term vision, rather than it turning into a catch-all for every group looking for space.

‘We serve everyone and I think if you want to make this a truly centred area for the whole community, we need to serve all ages in whatever is built here to make it a truly vibrant place and not ghettoize it into just serving youth or just serving seniors,’ said Jill Foster, CEO of the Aurora Public Library. ‘I think we need to mingle and be together, and that will make this area much more vibrant.’

For resident Greg Smith, however, there needs to be a clear plan.

‘I sometimes feel we're trying to jam in everybody's needs and wants within this confined space and when you do that, it just doesn't have an identity to it,’ he said. ‘My concern is it takes on an identity of its own and that identity is something that is supported by a lot of the community and it may, in fact, have to exclude certain people or groups to fit that identity.’

‘When you talk about a jewel or a centrepiece of the Town, I think it is pretty important not to just have a mishmash of everything.’

Although there were some differences in people's ultimate vision for the site, one thing that was crystal clear is residents want more parking in the area – and they want it now.

‘Parking is a very important issue,’ said one resident by the name of Mary. ‘I am not discounting we need a multipurpose facility, but we cannot by any stretch of the imagination build something like this without a tremendous amount of parking and we are already way short.’

Making parking a reality could become an issue, Mr. Downey noted. Razing the old library would create approximately 67 surface parking spaces. Tearing down the building next door would make room for a possible 40. If you build up, that limits the amount of parking on each level to make room for driving around, while digging down for underground parking, there the problem of significant amounts of water just beneath the surface, a problem encountered when building the new Library and renovating the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The parking issue will be underscored this summer when the first floor of Town Hall is closed for renovations and displaced office workers will set up shop in the Old Library. They too will need a place to park.