

Parking still at issue over Library Square plans

By Brock Weir

It's a problem that just won't go away and parking issues continue to plague plans for the redevelopment of Library Square. Council members had their first crack at revised plans for the long-gestating downtown revitalization project while sitting at the Committee level last Tuesday and, once again, inadequate parking promptly rose to the top of their concerns.

As The Auroran reported last week, revised plans included the reconfiguration of a proposed theatre into a multipurpose performance hall and the creation of a water/ice feature that would act as a year-round attraction on the site, which is planned to be sandwiched between the Aurora Public Library and the Church Street School, as well as a three-storey addition to the latter heritage building.

‘The outcome of this process is an artful, disciplined building that respects the heritage of the site through a distinct but complimentary design that will serve the Town well, as well as the Greater Toronto Area, well into the future,’ said architect Thomas Nameskeri of the new addition to the Church Street School. ‘We have made great efforts to design for the Town’s vision of this project as a vibrant cultural centre, attracting and inspiring people to learn from and engage with the artists.’

It was important, he said, to develop an addition that was both distinct from the Church Street School while not looking tacked on, he noted, showcasing the glass atrium that will act as a bridge between the two buildings.

‘It was important for us to acknowledge the history of the site and to compliment and integrate appropriate materials where possible,’ he said, adding that another driver was making sure the new building is not greater [in scale] than the school.

Outside, the revised plans have largely the same configuration, including an amphitheatre on the south side of the Square, terraces on the north, and a space dedicated to the Library on the west, added David Leinster of the Planning Partnership, along with an entry plaza to Library Square coming off Victoria Street.

The most notable distinction of the revised plan was the inclusion of a 400 square metre skating rink, which would be refrigerated to ensure it is accessible in the winter while, during the warmer months, it would serve as a water feature with jets coming out from the pavement.

‘It is not a big rink by any means, but one we think will serve the Town well,’ said Mr. Leinster, before describing the seasonal changeover of this feature. ‘We have a specialist on the team to help us do this and we have done this in other parks. It is certainly one we find successful and we think it is going to be engaging for families, children, and really animate the square in the summer, bringing a kind of cooling effect.’

In its various configurations, Mr. Leinster estimated Library Square could accommodate 1,000 people when used to its maximum capacity; that is, when the rink is not in use.

Yet, he added, this area will be serviced by a total of 79 on-site parking spaces, including accessible spaces.

While Councillor Michael Thompson said the plans indicated a ‘great job so far’ he raised concerns about a possible reduction of parallel parking spaces on site to make way for landscaping the laneway connecting the square to Yonge Street.

This, said Mr. Leinster, is still subject to a technical study and the total number of parallel parking spaces in this area is a bit of a moving target subject to outstanding geotechnical information and whether or not a retaining wall will be needed between Library Square and the privately-owned professional building immediately to the north of the site.

Councillors Sandra Humfries and Wendy Gaertner, on the other hand, continued to raise alarm bells over accessible parking and how the proposed numbers and configuration will impact Library Square, the Aurora Cultural Centre, and the Aurora Public Library in particular.

‘I am really going to be looking at that quite a bit as we make sure we have a really super-accessible building with accessible parking so’ with our aging population, we want everyone to go and enjoy the lovely Square so there are no barriers that are stopping anyone from enjoying the area,’ said Councillor Humfries.

‘I am not happy about the accessible parking,’ added Councillor Gaertner. ‘I am sure the Library is not happy about the accessible parking; I am sure the Library is not happy about the parking at all. You have to do better. I will not vote for this if this is the way the parking is going to look. We have too many people who want to use the Library. We have a lot of seniors who are already having trouble. You have to do something for them; provide a valet service, do something.’

Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services, noted at this point that Council's direction last June was to allocate accessible parking on the east side of the Library Square parking and have, at minimum, three accessible parking spaces installed. This condition was met, she said, but if Council asks for more, that can

be done.