

Proposed Victoria Hall renovations raises public eyebrows

A proposal to renovate Aurora's historic Victoria Hall for the future has raised eyebrows amongst members of the public concerned with the project's ballooning price tag.

Residents made their feelings clear before Council at this month's Committee of the Whole meeting.

While residents didn't question the need to preserve heritage buildings within the community like Victoria Hall ? which has served a range of uses from a church, to one of Aurora's first public libraries, to, more recently, a rental and storage space ? they did question the proposed price tag of \$2.2 million ? above and beyond the \$500,000 included in the municipal financial blueprint.

Among the primary reasons for the budget increase is recently-discovered dry rot in the flooring and replacing the addition on the building's south end to increase accessibility.

?I want to be clear that Victoria Hall is a cherished asset in the community,? said resident Rocco Morsillo. ?Built in 1883, it has [had] various roles throughout its career in Aurora? [and] the building, unfortunately, has not been used for many years.?

He said he was ?excited? when \$500,000 was earmarked in the budget to overhaul Victoria Hall, but questioned the rising figures.

?I have to ask, how are we getting to this point?? he asked, comparing figures to the costs to renovate commercial spaces. ?With the average commercial lease at \$25 a square foot, the return on investment is going to be very far in the future. I know the Town of Aurora is here to provide community spaces, but we have to look at things realistically in terms of the building use as well.

?My opinion is that this building is a cherished asset in Aurora. The building is in bad shape, we all know that. I want to make sure that tonight the project does go ahead. I want to be clear on that. We don't need to create the Taj Mahal there. We need to keep the design simple, the cost effective, and we can cherish the building for years to come without the hefty price tag.

?Victoria Hall has been sitting empty for a long time and I think we really need to do something to it. The solution would be to reverse-engineer the design based on the \$500,000 budget to bring it more in line. We need to get back to the consultant, we need to ask what can be done for this project for \$500,000, we need to work with local contractors and trades that may have ideas on how to bring this project within budget.?

Local historian David Heard was also among the delegates. He questioned how the building has been allowed to deteriorate to its current condition.

?How did we get to this state?? he asked. ?Was it just a forgotten piece of the Town Square plan? But now we want to integrate it to include it in the Square.?

He also questioned if renovations were being proposed with a specific, yet-to-be-announced tenant in mind, given that Victoria Hall was included in a Request for Proposal last year for new tenants for the Aurora Armoury and the Aurora Town Square Café.

While Uxbridge's Slabtown Cider Company has taken over what's now called Slabtown Armoury and the café is now the local base for Newmarket's My Indie Coffee, Victoria Hall is one missing piece of the puzzle.

?Victoria Hall has always been a community space, a library, Cubs, Guides, Scouts, parties, ghost tours, and it should remain,? Heard concluded. ?Victoria Hall should remain a public space. I think we're giving up too many of our historic spaces. We've lost a lot, we really have. I believe our community is worth investing in, just like our Strategic Plan lays out.?

Resident Steve Fleck said he had three simple questions related to the project: ?Why are we doing this? What are we getting in the

end? What is this place going to be used for??

?According [to the report before Council], ?the refurbishment of Victoria Hall supports the Strategic Plan goal of enabling a diverse, creative and resilient economy, promoting economic opportunities that facilitate the growth of Aurora as a desirable place to do business. The re-imagining of Victoria Hall will revitalize and possibly promote the entrepreneurship within the downtown core.'

?What does this mean? Please link that back to the three previous questions I just asked. I'm not against these sorts of projects ? third places and gathering places like this are vitally important for communities, but surely we need to have a better idea of what the end goal is here before we commit this kind of money and expense for Victoria Hall.?

The proposal will be up for further Council consideration this week.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter