

Public can weigh in on Library Square next month



By Brock Weir

Members of the public will have a formal chance to weigh in on the development of Library Square at a special Council meeting set for March 21.

The dedicated meeting comes after Council members sitting at the Committee level last week, received revised plans for the planned downtown gathering space, which included a year-round water feature, which doubles as a skating rink during the winter months, and a reconfigured performance hall as part of an expansion of the Church Street School.

The March 21 meeting will also include details on an estimated final price tag on the development and how the Town intends on paying for it.

‘We’re going to come back with a final schematic design and costing in March,’ David Leinster of The Planning Partnership told local lawmakers last week while presenting architectural renderings of what they envision for the site. ‘Assuming everything is on track, we will then enter into design development with construction drawings beginning in the summer and fall. Of course, there’s funding for the Square also moving along at that stage. We imagine that by the winter of 2020, construction of the new building and laneway connection out to Yonge Street could begin.

‘I should say that we’re in a position that we could build the upper parking lot off Victoria earlier, potentially even in 2019, without much problem. Then, anticipating by the fall of 2021, both the square and the new building (addition to the Church Street School) could be complete.’

Last Tuesday’s General Committee meeting afforded Council members to provide comments on developments thus far. Their concerns ranged from what was seen as an inadequate level of parking for Library Square as a whole, including the Aurora Cultural Centre and Aurora Public Library, to a lack of accessible parking for the Aurora Public Library in particular, to structural studies to ensure the foundation of the 1880s Church Street School will withstand construction.

Nevertheless, most lawmakers spoke positively about what they have seen so far.

‘Each time you come, it gets better and better, from my point of view,’ said Mayor Tom Mrakas who, as a Councillor between 2014 and 2018, was a major proponent of demolishing the Victoria Street buildings that once sat on the site of Library Square and creating something new for the community. ‘I think it’s incredible. I think there is some minor tweaking we can look at, and some things we might possibly like to add or subtract, so I am looking forward to those discussions in March when we can look at how we can move forward from concept to reality.’

But, there are still a number of steps that need to be determined before that step can indeed become a reality.

In addition to the building costs, the operational cost of Library Square and what that might mean for local taxpayers are important too, noted Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

‘When we’re building a new project, there’s often operating costs and these need to be taken into consideration because they can be quite significant and they can be put on the tax levy,’ she said. ‘This has been my point all along [with] the new building and the Square that we have no business plan and no operating plan to go with it and I think that is something that needs to be addressed.’

CAO Doug Nadorozny said that operations plan is due to come forward at that March 21 meeting as well.

Last week's General Committee meeting laid the groundwork for some of the costing implications that will crop up down the road, not only for Library Square, but also renovations to the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex.

The costing report was to give Council members time to "get the thought process started" on the various funding options and operating implications, said Mr. Nadorozny.

"It won't necessarily come forward with a specific strategy, but more likely a range of options for Council to consider on how they might fund both the capital project and the operating expense over the next few years."

In his report to Council, Jason Gaertner, Acting Treasurer for the Town of Aurora, said staff "Recognize that to ensure the financial success of these major investments, that they need to ensure a sound capital and operating funding strategy is devised for all of its investments."

"In many instances, capital investments may result in funding requirements that extend beyond this initial cost, such as the ongoing operating and maintenance costs that are necessary to ensure that the expected useful life is obtained from an investment.

Consequently, a funding strategy for those ongoing operating costs is also critical as the burden on the taxpayer from costs of this nature can be material."

Funding sources explored for all new capital builds, such as Library Square, include the Town's Hydro Funds, a reserve account established with proceeds from the sale of Aurora Hydro in 2005, which now sits at \$29.8 million, Development Charges, Community Benefit Fees collected from developers (now standing at \$2 million), Cash in Lieu of Parkland (standing at \$8.3 million), debt financing, grant funding, the tax levy, and debt financing.