

Rent subsidies nixed for groups displaced by Library Square construction

By Brock Weir

When the wrecking ball finally clears Library Square as early as this fall, several community groups will need to find accommodation elsewhere.

But Council is set to reject a staff recommendation this week calling on the Town to subsidize their rent.

The recommendations were put forward by Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation who, in his report to Council last week, said groups such as the 140 Air Cadet Squadron, the Faith Fellowship Baptist Church and the Aurora Bridge Club had requested support.

The 140 Air Cadet Squadron has been successful in finding an alternative space [to the old Library] to meet their needs; however, the new space has increased the present lease payment from \$870/year with the Town to \$8,400/year at the new location. They have requested subsidization from the Town to help bridge this gap. Staff are recommending the group be subsidized on a declining scale over the next 10 years.

The 140 Air Cadet Squadron would receive 90 per cent of the new lease rate in year one and that would decrease by 10 per cent each subsequent year. That would permit a payment in year one similar to their existing rent and permit them time to raise funds gradually, towards independence from the Town.

A further request was made by the Aurora Bridge Club, which recently vacated the old library for a facility in Newmarket. Their request was for a waiver of permit fees to use the Craft Room at the Aurora Seniors' Centre on Sunday afternoons from September to June of each year. A subsidy would have clocked in at \$7,500 of lost revenue to the Town.

Faith Fellowship's request was similar, asking for a waiver of fees to use the Centre's West McKenzie Room on Sundays of \$8,000 to keep their rent similar to what they were paying for the old library.

These requests, as well as a suggested \$10,000 infusion in the 2018 Budget to pay for staff to open and close the Seniors' Centre for the Church and Bridge Club, were rejected by Councillors at General Committee meeting and it is this rejection which is set for ratification this week.

For the most part I agree with it, but I do not agree with support for the Faith Fellowship Baptist Church, said Mayor Geoff Dawe. Mayor Dawe made a motion to remove the church from the equation, which failed to gain traction around the Council table, but an outright defeat was ultimately passed.

Councillor Jeff Thom, for instance, questioned whether providing these groups with a subsidy would create a precedent when collecting fees for the use of various municipal facilities.

It is kind of hard once you begin to subsidize groups for space and then not subsidize the other groups for space, he said. While this might seem like an insignificant amount of money comparative to the rest of the budget, what happens when a group of more significance asks for subsidization and, for a variety of reasons, want to improve their services to their users?

We charge just under \$1 million to hockey for ice time. At some point, I worry about subsidizing space or subsidizing groups for renting space. I know we have tried to do as much as we can for the groups at these two properties and we're moving ahead, but I am not in favour of this.

Councillor Michael Thompson also expressed some misgivings, particularly when it came to the Air Cadets. As the Air Cadets only had a three-year lease for the old library, Councillor Thompson said a 10 year agreement for subsidization, as recommended, did not make sense to him.

The tenants of the building were on a month to month lease, they were well aware for many, many years this was a temporary home and at some point they would have to move, he said. Now we have a report before us that, in some cases, is advocating that we provide them with an amount for a 10 year period. To me, I have trouble with the fact that we're subsidizing them for such a long period of time given that they were on a month to month lease.

Philosophically, I am having trouble saying we're going to give you the rent subsidy for a 10 year period when you only have a three year lease in front of you. If it would be three years and come back and reconsider it, depending on where they end up and how that is all going to work, so be it, but just the way the report is now I can't support it.

On a similar wavelength was Councillor Harold Kim who said he could not in good conscience subsidize third party groups using Town property.

Councillor John Abel, on the other hand, offered a different perspective.

Renewing his calls for using the historic Aurora Armoury as a resource for displaced community groups, despite that facility

potentially being the subject of a long-term deal discussed behind closed doors but not yet reported out to the public, he said the community groups' contributions to Aurora should be considered.

The Aurora Bridge Club has left. They are already in Newmarket and that is 240 seniors that travel and shop in our downtown core and they were there five days a week," he said. "It's a tremendous loss to our activities, economics and everything else we try and attain. I feel it is a nomadic situation we have left our clubs in. We can't do it for everybody but long-standing clubs like the cadets and bridge club should be given the same sort of treatment as other groups and organizations."