

Residents call for ?pause? and rethink of Victoria Hall plan

Council last week formally gave the green light to a controversial plan to renovate and update historic Victoria Hall ? but not before residents opposed to the project made a final push for a pause.

Residents delegated to Council last week to formally oppose Council's approval of Heritage Permits on Victoria Hall, the final step in allowing the \$2.2 million renovation plan to begin. Those opposing the plan cited a lack of transparency over the process and outcomes, including what the ultimate use of the building will be once renovations are complete.

Council approved recommendations on a lease agreement for Victoria Hall in Closed Session last month. While details of the agreement have not been made public, the idea it could become a restaurant has generated pushback from interested residents.

Resident Susan Morton Leonard was the first resident to appear before Council, making the case for the building to remain for community uses rather than any commercial future.

?Where's the rationale in turning a small heritage hall with a history of only public use into a private restaurant housed within a public square designed to provide activities and events for the community?? she asked. ?Are the cafes and restaurants within close walking distance not sufficient? [Why would] we as taxpayers desire funding another renovation for a publicly-owned heritage building within the civic square if they can't use it or benefit in any way? Will further tax dollars be poured into supporting a for-profit restaurant similar to the recently opened Slabtown Armoury? Slabtown Armoury is still in the honeymoon phase. We don't know if they will succeed long-term, especially when Niagara College?did not.

?There's already strong public concern, not about renovating Victoria Hall, but about the uses, which has been omitted from public discussions, even though uses dictate the renovation. Form follows function. Even Councillors have been hog-tied in not being able to speak about use publicly. People can see the commercial kitchen on the plan and know there is a lack of transparency, therefore losing trust in present Council members who are trying to ram a decision through just before the upcoming election.?

Voters, she said, should decide how Victoria Hall is used, a view that was shared by her fellow delegates.

?Next month is the last cycle of this term,? said resident Greg Smith, referencing this month's schedule of Council meetings. ?We should leave it to the next Council to decide. Let's hit pause on issuing heritage permits. The Heritage Advisory Committee wants to see design options, [there is a] public petition going around and will continue through the election process. The outcry of residents against issuing the permits is loud and growing. Let's engage residents during the campaign, show design options, business plans, rationale of commercial versus community use, before issuing permits.

?Let the residents have their say at the door with candidates. If, after a new Council is elected, armed with residents' input, the new Council can make a decision on issuing said heritage permits. Please press pause.?

Smith advocated for the building's continued use as a community space as well and questioned whether the Town has looked at the return on investment they might get from the planned renovation.

Costs were also a concern for resident Steve Fleck, who said that while he was not opposed to renovating and preserving the building, it was a matter of ?accountability and transparency.?

?Put simply, what will this historic building be used for when the renovations are finished?? he asked. ?I put the same question to you, Mayor Mrakas and Council, back in February when this news of blowing up to the \$2 million came to light, and despite committing over \$2 million to this project, we still do not know definitively what we will be getting when the dust settles on these important renovations.

?My understanding of accountability and transparency is keeping valued stakeholders fully apprised of what's going on. Since Victoria Hall is owned by the Town of Aurora, and that's all of us, we are all stakeholders in this, and we would like to know what the intended use of the renovated Victoria Hall will be.?

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