

Safety, equality driving forces behind ?overdue? Joint Ops Centre: proponents

By Brock Weir

After nearly three years of debates, numerous reports, and a ?demonstrated need? for a new Joint Operations Centre, it was high time to give the green light to the project last week, according to proponents of the plan.

For the five members of Council who voted in favour of the new JOC, it was a matter of moving forward not only to benefit those currently working in ?dilapidated? conditions in the current Scanlon Court facility, but also to build a facility that would bring added benefits to the community as a whole.

?We have had multiple reports, we have been debating this issue for two-and-a-half years, and there is no rush to judgement,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?The fact of the matter remains that no significant change has been made to this building since 1988. It is almost 30 years. Staff have continued to identify the deficiencies and the concerns with the building, the impact on service levels, the space limitations, the concerns for people who worked there, the fact that there is no female washroom.

?Over the next few years, when 2C comes online, it is roughly 3,000 homes and 8,000 people and plenty of land that we need to service. We need to look forward. We need to make sure we are taking care of those parks, those trails, those roads, and this is part of doing our job.?

While previous reports indicated at least \$3 million would be needed to maintain the Scanlon Court facility, the biggest mistake in this whole process, he said, was a too-low estimate on how much the site would be from the outset. Rejecting claims of ?ballooning costs?, he said previous estimates were influenced on the idea of renovating the old Aurora Hydro Building rather than purchasing a new site.

?Since we have moved from that issue, staff have done a good job of making sure the costs associated with this facility were scrutinized, were carefully viewed, adjudicated, and brought to us so we could determine what the needs were and what the wants were for the facility and how to move forward. There are questions about how some people don't like how the reports were written, some of the information being put forward, but the fact remains the need has been shown over and over. If we're going to make sure we maintain service levels going forward as this community continues to grow, we need to act today. We don't need to wait another two years or four years or 10 years like previous Councils have done. There is a need and this is us responding to it.?

For Councillor John Abel, one of the most important functions of a Council is to preserve infrastructure and Operations and Parks are an integral part of that. Combining the two departments into one facility is a mark of efficiency, he argued. Original underestimated costs, he said, could be attributed to building on a flat piece of land. When the plan changed to find a bigger plot of land, albeit one which had significant topographical challenges, the costs went up.

?It is a well-suited, centralized location in our industrial area and it is actually a perfect location,? he said. ?The cost of construction over the last decade has gone up 56 per cent so if you are going to defer to the next term of Council you are just going to add to the cost. This is a green, efficient, gold standard facility. It is going to be a more effective operation and will be one that can sustain our growth for at least 30 years as we grow out. You can be skeptical that perhaps we won't realize those [Development Charges to pay for it but] businesses are attracted to infrastructure as well as workforce and transportation. This is another way to attract business, which I am confident if it doesn't happen in five years, it can certainly happen within 10.?

As lands in 2C ? particularly in the residential area west of Leslie Street ? continue to be sold at a rapid clip to new homeowners, Councillor Paul Pirri said projections for Development Charges are on track. Projected population growth is also on track, underscoring the need for a new facility, he added.

?If we still had a population of 30,000, which is what this building was meant to handle, there would be no need to levy development charges for this program, but people are moving to Aurora, people like coming to Aurora, and we need bigger facilities

to manage that population increase. It makes sense to me that a large portion of those funds come from individuals moving into the community.?

This view towards Development Charges (DCs) was shared by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, who highlighted a number of developers going into the area that have sold out of their first phases. Aurora, he said, is an ?incredibly attractive? destination for people to move to and he was optimistic everything else would follow suit.

?Can we guarantee [the land sales] will continue?? he asked. ?Of course not, but indicators are that it will. As we keep getting immigration to this country we will keep having sales of houses. Those sales of houses will attract businesses that will come in and buy the Leslie Street and 404 lands that we have. As we get more residents, the possibility of more employees will be far more attractive for companies to move into those lands.?

He also rejected arguments made by Councillor John Gallo that this was the ?largest? and most expensive project undertaken by the municipality, arguing that while it might be true on paper, it is a sign of inflation and prices going up when one compares other big builds like the Aurora Public Library and the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex.

The project was also supported by Councillor Don Constable, who called the existing facilities an ?eyesore?, something that was also clear when he first sat on Council over 20 years ago.

?I was shocked to see nothing has changed,? he said. ?I understand it is a lot of money to spend, but we have to look at doing something.?