

Skate parks and brew pub considered in new vision for Aurora

By Brock Weir

They are buildings that have sat underused and without use for many years, but a new study is suggesting ways to breathe new life into community hubs all around Aurora.

Council is set to tackle recommendations this week that, if followed through, will dramatically transform how landmarks such as Petch House, the Aurora Armoury, Victoria Hall, and the long-debated former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Aurora Seniors' Centre are used ? with a focus on arts and culture, and even a microbrewery.

?Repurposing is all about taking advantage of what already exists rather than developing previously untouched land or demolishing older structures in favour of the new,? says the report, which was completed by AECOM and will be formally presented to Council this week by Arthur Diamond. ?And while we certainly have nothing against brand-new construction from the ground up, there is something uniquely special about being able to repurpose an old building. It is almost as though we are given the opportunity to breathe new life into a structure that might otherwise be on its last breath.?

The old Library and Seniors' Centre have been gasping for air for over 15 years, but the repurposing study suggests an overhaul on the existing buildings.

The consultants suggest a complete renovation of the former Seniors' Centre as a clubhouse dedicated to two clubs.

?The interior space will be completely renovated with carpet floors for the club rooms, ceramic tile for washrooms and concrete floors for the storage area,? says the report, which notes these changes will require significant upgrades.

Immediately south of this is the former library building which, in this plan, forms the centrepiece of the ?Victoria Cultural Plaza? which connects the building with the Aurora Cultural Centre to the south and the Seniors' Centre while turning Victoria into a one-way northbound street.

?Due to the juxtaposition of Victoria Hall, the Former Town Library and the Former Seniors' Centre around an open parking lot and the proposed repurposing functions, we have determined that this open space can act as a cultural nucleus in the Town of Aurora. In order to achieve this, we are proposing to direct traffic on Victoria Street north and Wells Street south to create more [diagonal] pairing on the street. The Cultural Plaza will have a glass canopy connecting the three buildings together and a dedicated entry allowing passenger drop off at every building front.?

Within the plan, Victoria Hall remains relatively unchanged with a small glass addition proposed for the back, but the more radical changes happen eastward at the Aurora Armoury. The report questions the long-term viability of permitting this space out to various groups, including the Aurora Farmers' Market and suggests it is an ideal location for a multipurpose facility housing art studios and gallery space, along with a small café. An alternative proposed for the location within the report is a microbrewery.

?Urban wineries and breweries have become an attraction in a number of cities, towns and villages across Ontario and far, attracting a large number of guests and tourists. As a result, and with the understanding of the Town, in order to attract more tourists to the Town and specially to this specific area and create evening vitality, it is proposed that the Armoury be converted into an urban brewery pub where guests will experience firsthand the art of brewery, sample different beers and have a chance to eat good food.?

Changes are also proposed for the other side of the tracks, namely the historic Petch Log House, which has been restored and reconstructed behind the current Aurora Seniors' Centre on John West Way. While it has been used for small municipal functions since it was reopened, the repurposing study suggests it could be a future winter destination.

?With the aim of providing more vitality and attracting more people to the area, a new skating path will be constructed and Petch

House will be repurposed as a change room which can provide service to the ice skaters, roller bladers and hikers alike.?

A gift shop and tourist centre is another proposed use for the building.

All this, of course, will come at a cost and Council will be doing some number crunching. In the report, which was received by Councillors at the Committee Level last week, recognizing the concept that if any of these recommendations are ultimately approved, money will have to be earmarked, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation noted that all the recommendations ? if carried out ? will clock in over \$10 million.

?Repurposing of existing and older buildings to serve new means can seem expensive at first glance,? reads the report. ?However, knowing that by repurposing buildings of historic, cultural and sentimental value, one can better use the buildings instead of spending more on demolition and constructing new buildings, which will look no different from the ones seen in the next town or across the continent [and that is an option] which should be thought of deeply.?