

Town Hall picked as location for Community Reflection Space

Aurora's planned Community Reflection Space will be located at Town Hall.

The location for the Reflection Space, which was an initiative proposed by Aurora's Indigenous Relations Committee in 2023, was formally approved by Council last week.

Town Hall was long on the shortlist of potential locations around Town, with the east end of the nearby Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park being among the preferred spots. Other locations considered included Lambert Willson Park and Town Park, but the amenities located within the municipal building helped the Town Hall forecourt win the day.

Following Council's approval on July 9, design work will now begin to transform the spot, just to the east of Town Hall's main entrance, where the Town's annual Christmas Tree Lighting ceremony took place prior to the pandemic, into a space where residents can come together in times of trouble and challenge.

Potential designs and budget will be the subject of further Council review and approval.

During consultation, staff learned that selecting a location that is publicly connected and provides a level of privacy best supports the mandate of the Community Reflection Space, said Michelle Johnson, Collections and Exhibitions Coordinator for the Town of Aurora, in a report to Council, noting that, in addition to residents, consultation included York Regional Police and Oasis Bereavement.

A designated Community Reflection Space acknowledges the complexity of emotions evoked during tragic circumstances, Johnson continued on why the parks didn't ultimately make the cut. These sentiments are not consistent with those expressed during casual recreation activities, sports competitions, special events or celebratory gatherings. During consultation, staff heard that the juxtaposition of uses would not be conducive to the goals of the Community Reflection Space.

This concern is especially relevant for Town Park, where the density of existing amenities makes it challenging to redefine an area. Staff also heard this concern when discussing Lambert Willson Park, which has an active trail system, a playground, multiple types of sports fields, and regularly hosts baseball tournaments. To a much lesser extent, this concern was shared when discussing Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park, which contains a playground, soccer field, and landscaped pathway. The layout and design of Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park tempered this concern as the recreation-based features are largely located at the west side, and the area being considered is at the far east side.

The Town Hall location was unanimously approved by Council on a vote of 7 to 0, but Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland indicated some hesitation on the designated space.

We were talking about a Reflection Space and how great of an idea it was; we had this vision it was going to be in a serene park, somewhere that was quiet, or somewhere where we could have a moment of reflection for a lack of a better term, she said. I read through the report and some of the comments all seemed to circle back to Town Hall.

The approved location, she added, was on a very busy corner of the Town Hall property.

I just think we can do better.

Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services, said the recommended corner had been used in the past as a gathering space and municipal staff today currently use it to take a few quiet moments throughout the day, such as enjoying their lunch on one of the benches already in place.

?It is a busy corner [but] it is somewhat tucked away and down grade from a busy street, tucked away behind the retaining walls. When it comes to actually a peaceful environment, some would say that it already is that,? said McDougall. ?I agree with you ? a park setting would?provide a lot more of that as well, but when they looked at the evaluations of all the possible variations on how the space could be utilized, Town Hall, through all the vetting, landed that it was the most suitable. I think there are pros and cons to this site as there was with all the parks as well for various reasons.?

Noting she was ?surprised? by the final recommendation, Councillor Gilliland asked what happened to interest expressed by the Aurora Seniors' Centre to put itself forward as a potential location with a gazebo.

?That is still a possibility if the seniors wish to propose the gazebo idea [but] it was not part of a public reflection space,? said McDougall. ?Our?concern, as I believed I relayed to you, would be the intention of this Community Reflection Space is it could gather quite a large group, it could be very political at times depending on the content of what the subject matter may be. It would have to be understood by the Seniors it was very public and wide-open, it couldn't be an exclusive site or location. I think in determination of the four sites that were proposed was based on the capacity, this space that was available, would not preclude the seniors from still proposing from having their gazebo if they wished to have that project.?

By Brock Weir