

Victoria Hall area residents push back against commercial use of historic building



Aurora residents pushed back against a potential commercial future for historic Victoria Hall last week.

Nearly two-dozen people met outside the landmark on the southwest corner of Mosley and Victoria Streets on Thursday evening to advocate for the building's continued use as a community facility rather than any future commercial uses — particularly a restaurant.

The demonstration came on the heels of Council approving confidential staff recommendations on a potential lease agreement for the building last week, and ahead of Council's formal approval of a \$2.2 million renovation plan.

Those who attended the rally last week spoke out not only against the potential of future use of Victoria Hall but also what they said was a lack of transparency regarding the renovations.

"It's a historic building, that is no question, and we would like to see it preserved — but see it preserved for the community of this area, actually for the whole Town," said resident Sarah Hartman. "We don't need or even want another restaurant. There's enough issues with the restaurant that is just up the street, [including] parking."

Hartman said it was "unfortunate" that nothing was going on in the nearby Performance Hall at Aurora Town Square that evening as it would have underscored how parking is at a premium in the area.

Nearby resident S. Morton-Leonard also cited issues with Slabtown Armoury, the restaurant that holds a lease on the municipally-owned Aurora Armoury space.

"Slabtown is still in its honeymoon phase. My kids have all been in the restaurant industry and the longevity is not great. We're going into a recession — do we need two?" she asked. "This renovation needs to happen, but minus a commercial kitchen. That may bring that ticket price down. This should have been done at the same time as Aurora Town Square, and I certainly spoke up at that point. Victoria Hall has always been a civic building. It needs to continue to be a civic building."

This was a view shared by Tim Hall who said it "makes no sense" the Town would put Victoria Hall into the hands of a for-profit business.

"We should not [renovate it for a commercial tenant] on the taxpayers' dime," he said. "That's not what our municipal government is for."

Morton-Leonard said she hoped Victoria Hall and its future will become a municipal election issue this fall, a sentiment that was shared by declared candidates who attended the rally in support of residents.

"When you're spending this kind of money, people's hard-earned tax dollars and having this kind of outcry that [residents] are not informed, they don't know, never really been given a good explanation of why it jumped from \$500,000 - \$2.1 million? where did we get it so wrong and what's the process to fix that error so we're not so far off?" said Ward 5 Councillor and mayoral candidate John Gallo.

Gallo said full disclosure of all documents related to the Victoria Hall renovation project, particularly the Class D estimate, would have "helped the community understand the ticket price" and "maybe it would have alleviated some concerns."

Ward 1 Council candidate Rocco Morsillo noted the residents "have been really loud and clear" they don't want a restaurant in Victoria Hall and the renovation should not be for a commercial use.

"We want to see it remaining as a community space, like it has always been," he said. "We don't need another commercial establishment here. We want to have Victoria Hall refurbished according to what the Heritage Committee wants in terms of design, and use it as a community space."

"I don't believe the Town should be leasers that are supposed to be making money. The Town's purpose is to be creating spaces for the residents, not making money. If you had to make money with a \$2.2 million spend, it's going to take 80 years to get that back at a lease rate in this building to a commercial unit. Let's renovate it to a standard that's suitable to the Heritage Committee, which would be a lot less than \$2.2 million, and let's bring it back as a community space."

Looking over the scene, incumbent Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said it was "less than a protest than just to get together and have some collegial talk about what the use of this facility should be."

He said the role of the municipality when it comes to heritage buildings is to be their stewards.

"Stewardship, to me, implies that we maintain these buildings, we keep them with a heritage purpose?and heritage purposes are not necessarily commercial. Heritage purposes, they will support the community, so this could be a variety of things that are not necessarily commercial in nature," he said. "It should be a community benefit."

"The residents in this area and the Town Park Community Association are in favour of supporting the Heritage Advisory Committee and their recommendations about the renovations here. I value the Heritage Advisory Committee, I value the volunteer participation that all of our advisory committees have, so when we see them opposing something like this, you have to take notes. I remain hopeful that with the amount of attention this has had?that perhaps this is so close with a 4 ? 3 vote, there may be one vote that is flipped one way. If that's the case, then we've got a different scenario ahead."

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter