

## Victoria Hall renovations move forward as Council members state case ? for and against



Renovations to historic Victoria Hall will soon be underway after Council approved Heritage Permit plans last week to allow the vision to take shape.

The ultimate vision for the site, along with how renovation plans took shape up to this point, remained questions on the table last week before the vote to proceed was supported 4 ? 3.

Lawmakers in favour of the plans hailed it as the start of a new chapter in the story of the historic landmark which will result in benefits to the Downtown and wider Aurora community.

Those opposed to the plan, however, said there has been a lack of transparency with the public on the future use of Victoria Hall and said it should remain a building in community- rather than commercial-use.

First to state their opposition to the plan was Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who cited the Town of Aurora's track record in heritage preservation, including its receipt of the Prince of Wales Award, a high honour from Heritage Canada for stewardship of built heritage.

She said proceeding with the renovation plan would be not only ?contrary? to the Town's stewardship role, but also to years of work carried out by local historians like Jacqueline Stuart, Leslie Oliver, and John McIntyre.

?I can't support the size and the cost of the new structure. I think it overwhelms the importance of Victoria Hall,? she said.

Also speaking out against the plan was Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo who said he was in favour of hitting pause on the project for now and letting the incoming Council ?deal with this? following October's municipal election. In his opposition, he cited the majority opinion of the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) as another reason to reconsider.

?I think the whole process was flawed,? he said. ?This should have gone to [HAC] before we passed the budget, before we have a full design. It should have been filtered through them way on in the beginning.

?I hope that we will seek their opinion and?they feel their opinion is still valuable.?

In stating his opposition, Councillor Ron Weese, who represents Ward 1 in which Victoria Hall is located, also cited the heritage component of the building and the work his own constituents have done to push back. As the Heritage Permits cleared the Committee hurdle on a similar vote for 4 ? 3, he suggested all it would take was one Council member to change their vote to write a

very different story.

'All I am asking here is for one of the people who voted to approve this to rethink what this is,' said Councillor Weese. 'When you change a heritage building, you change it forever, and that is a very important thing. It's not about urgency; I think it's better for us to have some thoughtful pause about this and then allow it to come back at the next term of Council.'

'I'm not suggesting that this should be an item for a referendum vote' but I really think our heritage buildings deserve some time. I would hope that somebody would join the other two people who have opposed this. Frankly, from a Ward 1 perspective, I'm very close [to residents'] interests and I want to respect all the times that they have come forward. That's my job, and I'm just hoping that other Council members here can think about that with respect to their own wards, and their representation of their residents.'

Last week's vote, however, came down on the same lines, with Mayor Tom Mrakas, and Councillors Rachel Gilliland, Michael Thompson, and Harold Kim voting to advance the permits and the renovation.

Before stating his support for the plan, Ward 4's Councillor Thompson asked municipal heritage planner Adam Robb whether the plan before Council dovetailed with heritage values.

Robb replied that, in his view, the proposed renovation design reflects 'best practices in the field' in that it not only preserves all of the building's designated heritage features but enhances them and reflects what he described as the 'principle of legibility.'

'In plain terms, legibility is about having an old asset and whenever there's a new addition considered for it, that new addition needs to be a product of its own time,' Robb explained. 'It's to be clearly legible between the old and the new. This allows the building to be readable over time and for future generations, as well actually then be also reversible, which is another buzzword principle in the sense that clearly distinguishes it 50, 100 years from now.'

'The rear addition is of modest scale. The current addition at the back, I'll be quite honest, is unsightly and unsympathetic and I think this certainly upgrades and enhances the user experience and the visual experience of the property, and accounts for better accessibility as well, which is something that we discussed at HAC'. I also think this reflects good design because the design as presented is highly adaptable to the multitude of potential uses. I think being able to accommodate a wide variety of uses and be preserved through the work that this Council has the opportunity to do now. [It] not only provides benefit today, but ultimately for long-term, for future generations to consider how this property will evolve, how uses will evolve over decades, over a century, so we're not looking at anything in isolation. This is a good project that can last and benefit the community and many generations beyond.'

Speaking in favour of the renos, Ward 2 Councillor Gilliland said it was a 'really tough topic' and one that had 'become deeply emotional for a lot of people in our community.'

'I've received many emails, phone calls, messages from residents on both sides of the spectrum and want people to know that I've really taken the genuine time to listen to everybody and reflect on everything that was shared with me,' she said. 'I also understand that some people I respect and care about may not agree with me and that is not something I dismiss lightly. In fact, it has taken a huge emotional toll on me and reflection of why I make the decisions that I do around the Council table looking at policies and being able to make a decision that's honest [with] my own integrity and my own principles.'

'I do feel that there's a bigger political debate here that's gone beyond the actual restoration of the Hall itself. I appreciate that people have raised concerns about the process, the consultation, the future use of the building. They are valid for people to express that I totally respect it and ultimately I just may land a little bit differently than others. And at the end of the day, stewardship and fairness and the long-term interest of the Town is what I'm really focusing on.'

Mayor Tom Mrakas recognized those who came out to last week's meeting to speak out, but noted throughout this process he has heard 'many different points of view.'

?As members of Council, it is our responsibility to listen to all viewpoints. Our responsibility is to consider all perspectives, all voices, all facts, and ultimately make decisions that are in the best interest of the entire community, not just today, but for generations to come,? he said.

?While we value every opinion from residents, committees and stakeholders, we also have a duty to consider the advice of experts and weigh that against the broader interests of our community. In this case, the professional heritage consultants, architects, and Town staff are unanimous in their recommendation to move forward through the heritage permit process. And there's a reason for that. This proposal does exactly what great Town building should do: preserve the historic character of the building while ensuring it remains functional, relevant, and protected for generations to come.

?This addition will allow Victoria Hall to stand proudly as a heritage feature while integrating it into the world-class cultural and community destination that we've created around Aurora Town Square.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter