

Victoria Hall should remain a community space, say residents

The future use of Victoria Hall in the face of significant renovations has not yet been determined, but the venerable heritage building in Aurora's downtown core should remain as it has been for nearly 150 years: a place where residents can come together for a variety of reasons.

This was the message driven home to Council by residents last week as lawmakers debated the merits of the renovation plan.

Leta Dayfoot, who described herself as a "fly on the wall" at Council meetings, said "heritage was not just a building, but the history of the people within these buildings who were the foundation and the strength of the community of Aurora."

"The building (Victoria Hall) housed a church, a library, public health programs, a meeting place for local organizations and even a dance studio," she said. "Within the walls of Victoria Hall, the people of the community were provided with the space for spiritual growth, for education, for medical needs, and social networking, just to name a few. From my view, I see this as the legacy of Victoria Hall."

"Why can't this be Victoria Hall's legacy for today? a hub for the social needs of today's community? For example, a meeting place for youth to do homework, to listen to music, for programs like Out of the Cold, or community breakfasts provided by local churches or historical collections of different genres, for social clubs, etc. I have heard Victoria Hall is in much need of repairs to make it useful and safe for the community once again."

"I have heard that \$500,000 to \$800,000 would cover the cost to rebuild Victoria Hall to a point that would preserve the structure to the point of reclaiming its legacy in a hub of community needs. I understand that the project to refurbish the Victoria Hall has ballooned to over \$2 million, which is available and can be accommodated from the facility asset management and growth and new reserves. This is a big chunk of money. It could be going towards many other heritage buildings and projects within this Town. Isn't that just common sense?"

Also advocating for community use Town Park-area resident Linda Durringer, who said renovations and future use must take into account the impact on existing residents.

"I would appreciate clarification on: the full scope of the proposed renovations; the intended long use term of the space; anticipated impacts such as noise traffic, parking servicing requirements, garbage storage, lighting and operating hours," she said. "Will there be further opportunities for public input? I have reviewed the 2016 AECON repurpose study, which outlined renovations estimated at approximately \$600,000, including an accessible ramp, washroom, electrical updates, all reasonable and community focused improvements. Why was there no action taken on this report?"

"Residents deserve a clear explanation of why costs have risen so substantially and whether the scope of the work has changed accordingly," she continued. "Even if these renovations proceed, it is difficult to see how taxpayers would reasonably recoup an investment of approximately \$2.2 million through rental revenue within any foreseeable timeframe. Victoria Hall sits in an established residential neighborhood. Transparency and proactive communication are essential to assuring that the quality of life of surrounding residents is thoroughly considered. As a community, we own this property. Why must the Town become a landlord? Why can this not remain a vibrant, public space, a meeting space, a rentable venue for weddings, reception, AGMs, celebrations of life and community gatherings?"

The building in question, she maintained, should not go in the direction of the Aurora Armoury, now home to the restaurant Slabtown Armoury.

"Victoria Hall is designated heritage building. Preservation, not commercialization should be our goal. We do not need another beautiful heritage building altered with a modern glass atrium or by illuminated sign shining into the night. We have already seen

that within our downtown heritage district on Yonge Street. Victoria Hall is a beautiful reminder of Aurora's past. Since 1883, the men and women who passed through these doors helped shape this Town into the community we are proud of today. To be surrounded by buildings with such history is an honour. With plans to revitalize our downtown core and preserve its historic buildings and facades, we must remain focused on protecting what is historic rather than modernizing it beyond recognition.?

Resident Shawn Deane was also among the residents objecting to the price tag before Council.

He also questioned the need for the addition on the back of Victoria Hall to be replaced to increase accessibility, when \$20,000 had previously been approved for a ramp.

John Hartman, a member of Aurora's Committee of Adjustment, also looked closer at the figures.

?Council gave approval to the Mayor's Budget on December 7, 2025. \$500,000 might have been approved at that time, but now jumped to a \$2.2 million factor. \$2 million for what? Don't get me wrong, I'm 100 per cent behind the preservation, protection, and required renovations of heritage assets within the Town, but why the bump?? he asked. ?The word ?transparency' is defined by Webster's as the quality of being open to public scrutiny. Transparent leadership uses words like ?authentic,' ?humble', ?open-minded', and helps build rationale behind decisions to build trust, morale, and accountability.

?You cannot convince me that when the final budget was approved last December, no one knew about what was coming down the pipeline for potential escalation and costs for renovations. We waited 10 years to take action on potential Victoria Hall renovations. It's not going to fall down this year. Why put the rush? Why not put it to election time this fall? Please don't tell me this has no impact on taxes. The [tax] levy, maybe. But who built that pool of funds? We did, the taxpayers. If it's truly called the ?People's Budget', why not ask people during the fall election period what people might think or want? Why not have staff complete an engagement process like we did on the official plan for the Town Park refurbishment??

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter