

## Victoria Hall to receive new lease on life following approval of reno budget



Historic Victoria Hall will receive a significant overhaul to preserve it for future generations after Council approved a contentious renovation plan on a vote of 4 ? 3.

The decision will see the budget for the long-proposed project increased from the \$500,000 approved this past fall at budget-time to nearly \$2.182 million.

Municipal staff attribute the budget increase to several factors, including the replacement of the floor structure due to previously-undetected dry rot, and replacing the existing addition to the rear of the building with a new structure to bring it up to code with Provincial accessibility requirements.

Supporting the proposal were Mayor Tom Mrakas, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, who agreed the proposals were essential in ensuring the building for future generations. But those who voted against the proposal ? Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo ? said more information was needed to make a decision, including the potential future use of the landmark on the southwest corner of Victoria and Mosley Streets.

?Council has not reviewed a public report demonstrating the return of investment at this new cost level. This fundamentally changes the financial reality of this project,? said Councillor Gallo. ?Council has a duty to also ask whether this level of investment represents the best and most responsible use of public funds. We should seriously consider whether we should pause, reset and evaluate whether this project should proceed, whether its scope should be reconsidered, or whether these funds should be allocated more effectively to other priorities that deliver greater value for residents.?

Councillor Gallo questioned the timing of the proposed budget increase and requested that the matter go into Closed Session discussions to receive ?full and complete information, including specific details that cannot be discussed publicly? and ask the ?necessary questions required to fulfil our fiduciary responsibility to the residents of Aurora before any final decision was made.?

Councillor Weese had a similar point of view, stating the debate was ?not about?preservation of heritage,? but rather the process that got Council to this point.

?We don't have adequate information,? he said. ?I just don't want to be an accomplice on this by voting on behalf of this to make it move forward because we want to preserve the building. I think we need to look at the building and look at the use of the building for heritage purposes, and the renovation of this building should suit those purposes.?

?I don't think there's any emotion in this, at least there isn't for me,? he continued later in the meeting. ?If there is for other people,

this is a sound decision that should be made on facts and we don't have those facts. I don't have those facts and I'm not going to be complicit with the lack of facts that are not provided in here and vote in favour of something that residents have explained they don't want?. If somebody thinks this dry rot is worth \$1.67 million, I'm no builder, but this doesn't make any sense to me. I'd like to see some facts. I'd like to see where they are and, if in another two or three weeks, or six weeks, whatever it takes, in order to be sound about what [decision] we're making, I'm ready to wait.?

Councillor Gaertner also urged a pause, adding that the project needs to be looked at 'very clearly' and through the lens of how residents and visitors could enjoy the building.

'We have to preserve this building. It's under the Ontario Heritage Trust, which does not dictate what we do with it, but we have to ensure that it stands,' she said. 'It's a beautiful building. This project was not in the 10-year Capital Repair and Replacement Reserve. It was not in our 10-year Capital Plan. That reserve fund is already substantially in deficit without adding a new project' and that's very concerning to me and I think concerning to some of our taxpayers because the purpose of that fund is to manage long-term sustainability of our infrastructure and our buildings.

'I think when we are thinking about the residents and their tax dollars and what they want in that residential neighborhood, what are our goals and what are our responsibilities? To me, that is to preserve the heritage building, to celebrate the Gothic Revival architecture. I am not interested in changing the use, adding a use? [Neighbours are] already coping with the noise and light from the Town Square, from the Armoury. I think what we need to do is respect the heritage of this building and leave it at that. And I think if you would do a survey, an official survey of this area, you would find out that that's what the residents would want.?

Proponents of the plan said they too had concerns about the rising costs, but argued that not only was improving Victoria Hall part of the overall revitalization plan for Aurora's historic downtown, but the improvements on the table would have to be done regardless of the cost to make the building usable and accessible for the future.

'I, for one, believe that we have one of the most competent and professional staff in York Region,' said Councillor Kim. 'Sure, there could have been ways to mitigate the shock value of the sticker price, likely, but I do believe that these figures given to us is essentially a figure that provides Council and the Town with the most flexibility to provide the [broadest] range of usage for this building. In the end, we've all heard there's three options here - we either sell it, we renovate it, or demolish it. Demolishing it is not an option. Leaving it as is is not an option because we can't do anything with it because it's not safe to even go in. This \$2.1 million - is that a lot of money? It certainly is. My view of the funds is there's a cash component of a financial ledger and there's also an asset component. Whatever we put into this building, whether it's \$500,000 or \$2.1 million, the value of our assets is still the same.?

As the debate continued, he added he felt needing more time to debate is a common refrain around the Council table on big projects, and it was time for action.

'I'd like to move the business of the Town and the vision for a greater Aurora where there is a great community benefit - not a small one, but a great community benefit,' he said. 'We have to get over the initial sticker shock and move ahead to what the possibilities can be.?

This was a similar standpoint to the one voiced by Councillor Gilliland, who said the question ultimately came down to not whether to invest in the project, but 'whether to do it strategically now or relatively later.?

'At the end of the day, I'm fundamentally just looking at the original point [and that is] to bring Victoria Hall to a standard that is compliant to our building codes, AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) compliant, has safe electrical and has a building that will be legendary for the next 75 years,' she said. 'This is a building we have refurbished a few times in its lifetimes by other Councils over the years. It's not really a question of whether or not Victoria Hall requires an investment. It needs an investment?.

'I believe that's what's being presented from staff and what we've asked is minimally the structure that it needs in order to move

forward to keep it?. I think our hearts are all in the same place here, and I don't think that there's going to be an outcome that is really going to change today or two months from now.?

Councillor Thompson voiced a similar viewpoint. While he said he was not opposed to going into Closed Session for further information, he voiced skepticism on whether this information would lead to a different outcome as well. He stressed Victoria Hall was part of the original AECON study carried out in 2016 that also looked at the repurposing of the Aurora Armoury and the old Library and Seniors' Centre buildings on Victoria Street that were demolished to make way for the Aurora Town Square redevelopment, as well as future uses for Petch House.

'Today, I'm very proud that we made those decisions because, as a result, we have Town Square. We have a wonderful new addition. It's been well-received from the community and it was a good choice, but a challenging one,' he said. 'It took a long time to get there and part of that struggle was what was going to happen, and you had to get buy-in and Council to be able to agree on some degree of vision. The biggest step we had was the demolition of the Seniors' Centre and the old Library because that really focused us then to move forward and say, 'Okay, we're no longer looking at repurposing. Let's figure out the vision for this empty space.' Still took some time, but we got there. Now we have a similar conversation where we have an underutilized asset that is just sitting there.

'We need to make a decision to go forward with this asset and how are we going to utilize it. I think from what I've heard around the table, everybody's in agreement that we're not looking to rebuild on this site. We want to utilize the current building in the best possible way?. Regardless of the use, whether it's community space, whether it's a commercial usage or some others, you know, these renovations still need to be done.

'The truth is that if we want to refurbish Victoria Hall, if we want to use it, whether it's for public use or for commercial use, we need to do this, and we have the estimates.?

Mayor Mrakas also cited the AECON report as one of the reasons he supported moving forward with the renovations to Victoria Hall.

'This is an investment in our community that we've been working towards ? a goal of creating a vibrant downtown core and it's another piece of the bigger puzzle of that revitalization,' he said. 'We need to invest in our community?because if we don't invest in our community, we can't expect the private sector to invest in our community?. I think our community is one of the best places to live, work and play ? and there's a reason why we are here. It's because we continue to invest in ourselves, in building something, in moving towards strengthening our community and our downtown core.

'This is how you build a vibrant downtown. This is how you build a strong local economy, an economy, and a downtown, and a community that our residents can be proud of and that not only today, but generations will be proud of.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter