

Council nixes study on moving Town Hall to Square

An idea to explore the feasibility of moving Town Hall from John West Way to Town-owned land at the corner of Yonge and Mosley was dead on arrival at Council last week.

On a vote of 4 ? 3, Council voted down a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas to explore the feasibility of moving the seat of government closer to Town Square while using the sale of the John West Way property to finance the build. This property, in turn, could be sold for affordable housing options, Mayor Mrakas said.

The purpose of the motion was to ?ensure the Town of Aurora and this Council continue to build on the past fiscal management of our Town finances and seek to plan wisely for the future needs of the Town and community,? he said, introducing his motion on April 25.

?Our most recent auditors' statement indicates Aurora is in a strong financial position and this is largely due to both current and past Councils' prudent management of Town finances, responsible asset management and forward-planning community building initiatives such as the Armoury and Town Square,? he said, adding the motion was just to explore options and ?should not be spun? to suggest anything more.

Supporting his motion, Mayor Mrakas said COVID-19 has resulted in a ?dramatic shift? in work arrangements at Town Hall and that ?on any given day a third to only a half of the office space at Town Hall is occupied.?

?The operational costs of continuing to maintain the current building footprint are substantial,? he said. ?Given the post-pandemic reality, it is our responsibility to consider the best use of all our assets to ensure fiscally-responsible planning for current and future use.?

A move to smaller premises ?could generate significant benefits, substantial municipal revenue, the ability to stimulate development of much-needed housing?[and reduce] future operating costs.?

?We have a long-standing objective to revitalize our downtown core and we have invested in our downtown revitalization with the development of Town Square, a significant component of which is the need for consistent day business. Town Halls and government offices where services are recognized are essential components of a healthy downtown and that is because the employees and the people who visit? use area businesses.

?If we want to change our path to a positive future, we need to be open to take bold steps,? he concluded, adding that returning the seat of government to the historic core could provide an additional 150 parking spaces to be used after hours and weekends for events, and any build would include further retail on the ground floor.

?I look forward to working with the community and all of you as we work to build a brighter future for the community.?

Other Council members were skeptical any move in this direction would illuminate a path forward.

First to speak in favour of moving forward with the feasibility study was Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson who said that while there are ?more questions than answers? on moving to a new Town Hall, seeing the value of the John West Way property was worth exploring.

?This report?would hopefully be able to ascertain the value of this land and what potentially we could do with that? said Councillor Thompson. ?We have always talked about how one of the roles on Council is to look to the future and make decisions based on not just the needs of today but the needs of tomorrow. Simply put, this would put some further information so that we can make a well-informed decision. I am not interested in moving the Town Hall if it has a big price tag that the taxpayer has got to bear, but if

there is a potential for it to be offset with this, then I am willing to have the conversation.

?It has to make sense, the benefits have got to be there, the impact we have to understand not just to the residents in this community here but also to the downtown core as well and hopefully some of that will be able to be identified through the staff report. I don't know where this conversation goes, but it is just a conversation.?

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, who also voted in favour of moving forward, was of a similar mindset, stating the conversation was ?hypothetical.?

When he first read the motion, he says his ?eyes went wide and I scratched my head,? with the first question being, ?Do we really need a new Town Hall where we come ahead financially?? This was followed by questions around traffic, underground parking, and if there would be room for growth. Answers to these questions won't come without a feasibility study, he said.

?I need to be convinced significantly to even consider such an option but that is not a discussion we're having here tonight,? he said. ?We're just asking staff, as has been relayed earlier, to just have a review.?

The vote ultimately came down to Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, who voted not to move the motion forward.

?I have been hearing from people in my ward and outside of the ward about this and the overwhelming opinion is that this may be just too soon,? said Councillor Weese, noting concerns over the Aurora United Church rebuild, the final phase of Town Square, and more making the quadrant in question a hive of activity. ?? This is in my ward and there are a lot of impacts and the residents around Mosley Street and Church Street and even deeper in the Town Park, so I am very interested in what our colleagues have to say about the value of this going forward now because the suggestion is that maybe this is just not the right time. Maybe it's the right thing, but not the right time.?

Councillor Gilliland also questioned the timing, stating Aurora has a ?lot of great projects on the go.?

?I will be the devil's advocate and say we have invested in our downtown,? she said. ?We had the BIA (Downtown Business Improvement Association) here and we're making investments and supporting them, the Economic Development Board as well. I recall the vision of this property when we decided to move forward with this was to put residential down there and possibly attract some sort of piazza?. I have also talked to several residents who are very well aware of the motion and have made several suggestions I think do make a lot of sense. If we are at a deficit with programming space on the third floor is a separate entrance, maybe we consolidate our Town offices and the JOC (Joint Operations Centre) and the main floor or wherever we need to and continue with the hybrid and allow that for programming space, or give it to some charitable organizations that require some space.

?Land is in a deficit right now and I don't see the value in selling a piece of land that we currently have. I would like to disagree with having Town Hall offices downtown and being vibrant and bringing people down there; I would compare that to flyby visitors who want to get in and out. Versus putting some affordable housing and partnering on a development plan for people to live and eat and play in that neighbourhood with some restaurants. Target market affordable housing, definitely some young families and maybe some families who are just getting going and having young kids. They are the ones who are going to go out their door to the restaurants and shops on a daily basis.?

Similarly, Councillor Gaertner said she had heard from ?so many residents? about the motion and none of them had been in favour of moving forward.

?There has been so much construction in the downtown area,? she said. ?People don't want anymore. A lot of people said it is going to be dark most evenings and weekends. I know we do have some things at Town Hall and perhaps people don't know how much we've got going on in Town Hall in the evenings, but I don't think that would generate the kind of traffic. [I'm] categorically not in favour; I have to go with what my residents think.?

Last to speak against the motion was Councillor Gallo who said he viewed the matter as two separate issues; the first being the revitalization of downtown, "and what's being proposed may very well do that", and the second was the current inventory of office space.

"Before you do a feasibility study you have to analyse [if] we need it and I would argue that we would first take a look at the JOC, because I suspect the stats are probably similar there," he said. "Can we move back the departments that are in the JOC and house them in here again and rent out the JOC and generate some income? Those are the things I would like to explore before any of this. Let's figure out our current assets, let's figure out how we can best use them in this environment and perhaps we can move into this environment. If we find this doesn't work we need to find different ways of doing it."

By Brock Weir
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