

Councillors defend lease deal, costs negotiated behind closed doors

By Brock Weir

Local Councillors are defending a decision made behind closed doors to strike a deal with Niagara College for the use of the Aurora Armoury.

Councillors faced criticism from one of their own at the last Council meeting of the year when it came time to firm up the Town's move to lease the historic building at the northeast corner of Mosley Street and Larmont Street to the College for an offshoot branch of the Canadian Institute of Food and Wine.

A long-time vocal opponent to the deal who said he would rather see the building used solely for municipal purposes, Councillor John Abel was firm in his criticism of Council moving ahead with the agreement, which was negotiated in closed session.

"When we are discussing something like this, we should have it out in the open," said Councillor Abel on the \$4 million agreement, translating to \$400 per square foot which he said is "exceedingly high" for any business, and also taking aim at the decision to sole source the deal to Niagara College rather than putting the option up for a public bid. "I think the norm to build new is far less. I am not comfortable with the cost, I am not comfortable with the lease because it really is the taxpayer that is going to pay for that."

In response to Councillor Abel's comments, Doug Nadorozny, CAO of the Town of Aurora, said that while initial estimates to refurbish the Armoury came in around \$2.1 million dollars, that was just to refurbish the existing shell, properly insulate it, update some of the infrastructure and bring it up to code. The proposal to expand the building is the reason for the expanding budget.

"With the repurposing, we made sure that the renovations are done so with the idea this is community space first and foremost and even if the day comes where the college doesn't use it, a very minimal amount of renovations would be required, if any, frankly, to leave it as open community space.

"There is also an allowance for the work to integrate the building into Town Park. There is a significant component of landscaping and patio and those kinds of things. None of the design work has been done yet, but we have thrown a number in there for all of that detail to come back to Council.

"Since we were doing this all confidentially at the time for the benefit of both parties, the purchasing bylaw allows under this circumstance to do a sole source. The architect we had chosen had experience doing similar facilities and had worked with Niagara College in the past. It was with that we sole sourced."

The majority of Council members defended the move to negotiate the details behind the scenes, including Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who said she wasn't always on board that the Niagara College deal was the best move for Aurora.

"I have always been very careful about going into Closed Session and making sure it was appropriate," she said. "I think it was appropriate and I don't want to be implied by anyone at this Council table that it wasn't. It's a very complicated subject, it was a very complicated negotiation, it took a lot of thought, took a long time for me to come around to the idea, but I think we have made a good choice and I am hoping that at the end of the day the community will feel that as well.

"It is an exciting opportunity and Aurora has always been behind. A bold move? I am not sure. We thought it out very, very, very, very carefully and there was an agreement by eight out of nine people sitting at this table and we have moved forward with that. I really don't like anyone implying I did anything untoward. I don't believe that I did."

Councillor Tom Mrakas followed suit.

"I have seen Councillor Gaertner in action many times and she has been one of the biggest proponents to if you go into closed session you're doing it for the right reasons, so I think if we weren't following the process, if there was one person who would stand up to say it, it would be Councillor Gaertner. I think we can reassure everyone, all the residents, that we felt we did everything properly," he said.

Added Mayor Dawe: "I have no doubt that if we were straying [beyond the rules of Closed Session outlined by the Municipal Act] our solicitor and/or our Clerk or CAO would let us know we were going in a direction we shouldn't. I have no doubt in my mind that the direction we followed was solid."