

Demolition approved for Library Square buildings

By Brock Weir

The fate of the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street will be sealed as early as next summer after Council approved their demolition on Monday night.

Council voted 8 ? 1 to demolish buildings, whose futures have been the subject of heated debate for nearly 17 years, which stand immediately north of the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Monday's meeting also solidified Council's vision for Aurora's historic downtown core, voting to maintain the main features of Town Park after earlier consultant work called for a dramatic overhaul of the property, including the elimination of the baseball diamond and relocation of the band shell.

They also approved a future report on specific ?enhancements? that can be made to the park, moving forward with repurposing the historic Aurora Armoury, and beginning a ?design exercise? on the future of Library Square.

In Monday night's presentation from staff, Council was told that the cost of renovating, repurposing and renovating the former library up to code would cost \$3.84 million, with a further \$569,000 needed to do the same with the former Seniors' Centre.

Similar work to the Armoury could be just over \$2.18 million.

Council was nearly unanimous in each decision, with Councillor Paul Pirri voting against the demolition of the old library for reasons he admitted were ?nostalgia? for the building, while Councillor Wendy Gaertner cast her vote against the seniors' centre's demolition.

Although not opposed to the demolition itself, she argued the building's existing tenants, Morneau Shepell, should remain in place, along with the building, until they are ready to move forward with a new plan and design.

?The public will seem to be to tear down the building and we're here to represent the public will,? said Councillor Gaertner who, in previous years, had spoken of the heritage value of the old Library. ?Whatever we decide to do with that land, we need to use it for the public good. It is their land, we're going to need partners, but it needs to be public space.

?It is not good enough to say we're just going to knock down two buildings and then decide what we're going to do about it. We all know that we have to try and find partners to help us do whatever it is that our vision is?but to just tear it down in advance of knowing what we're going to do with it, I don't agree with it.?

A similar view ? and a bit of frustration ? was offered by Councillor John Abel, who cited a motion he made over a year-and-a-half ago to move forward with a design, only to have it halted for a broader study on the Cultural Precinct as a whole.

Making a failed motion to delay a final decision until December 13 for further information, he said it is not wise to leave the tenants to find a new home without a plan in place.

?There is no harm in going first with the design,? he said. ?You can do a design and get it back within three months and have the tenants relocated in six months, find partners and then demolish it. That would be responsible in so many ways. I can't support it for all those reasons. We need to show our community and people that we're ready to engage and partner and build a vision and do Library Square.?

On a recorded vote, however, Councillor Abel ultimately voted in favour of demolishing both buildings.

Most Council members agreed the demolition was the ?first domino? that had to fall before a grander vision could be realised in spurring the demolition of Aurora's Downtown Core.

?I think it is time to take down both of those buildings and make it something spectacular,? said Councillor Sandra Humfries. ?It is tough to make the decision, but we need to just do it. It has been too long. It is going to cost a lot of money to repurpose.?

Taking an opposing viewpoint to Councillor Abel, Councillor Tom Mrakas, who made the motions ultimately accepted by Council this week, said there has been more than enough public engagement to support the demolition.

?I think we have exhausted collaboration and speaking to the residents, and taxpayers and community partners,? he said, adding that reports have been accumulating over the past 15 years and momentum had been built only to have that stalled when it came to next steps, a ?vicious circle? in his words. ?We have been doing this for 10 years.?

Added Mayor Geoff Dawe: ?I believe if we take this step now we free ourselves up. If anybody has looked at the old Library building, we have part of the entrance on the west side all fenced off because it is not safe. If you talk to anybody who worked there, there is nobody who loved that building. It is a horrible building. I think any historical significance, which is slim, in my opinion, is at the front not the back. If we have a blank slate, can't someone look at how to incorporate design features from what was there and bring that into a new building which will be something we can all be proud of??

By the time existing tenants ? including the community groups making use of the old Library ? relocate and a public process is followed on securing a demolition contract, CAO Doug Nadorozny said it was unlikely the buildings would be demolished until the summer, at the earliest. A final design for Library Square by the spring, he added, would also be ?a stretch.?