

Disclosure of land deals leads to tension around Council table

By Brock Weir

Efforts by two Councillors to be more open about land deals involving Town Hall led to heated words around the Council table last week.

One was a motion from Councillor John Abel calling for information to be made public on a potential land deal discussed in closed session ? one apparently not acted upon ? as it related to the future of the proposed Cultural Precinct development.

The plots of land in question are located at 15157, 15165 and 15171 Yonge Street between Mosley Street and the Aurora Public Library and currently occupied by professional offices, restaurants, and a hair salon.

The potential sale of this land was discussed by Council in a closed session meeting in January after FOTENN Consulting, in a presentation to Council, said the lands, which were for sale, could be transformed into a mixed use retail and condominium development to stimulate the Precinct and the Downtown Core as a whole.

Making public information discussed on the matter behind closed doors, wherever possible, would be important in considering how the community ? and Council ? progresses with the Precinct, argued Councillor Abel.

?Anything in closed session that can be brought forward for public consumption should be brought forward,? said Councillor Abel. ?Anything that would be harmful and should be kept confidential is kept confidential, [but anything that is not] should be brought forward to the public. There is one report I thought would be good for discussion when [the Precinct] comes forward.?

Council members, however, said they opposed Councillor Abel's motion for a number of reasons, including Councillor Michael Thompson who said it is a request they have never entertained when it comes to a property deal, citing unsuccessful attempts by Councillor Wendy Gaertner to make public information on land sales in Aurora's Leslie Street business land on the basis that specific properties were being cited.

?If this really is all about accountability and transparency, and that is at the root issue, let's do it for [everything], all of the properties,? said Councillor Thompson, throwing closed session reports on the Town's long-gestating Ivy Jay Nature Reserve and the aborted Hillary-McIntyre Heritage Park into the mix. ?If we truly are talking about accountability and transparency, let's not identify one thing, unless there is a specific issue [on which] Councillor Abel has a concern, otherwise they are all of interest to the community in various different factions.

?I am happy to support the disclosure of information, but all of them.?

This was a view shared by Councillor Harold Kim, who successfully put forward a motion moments before Councillor Thompson moved to put Councillor Abel's motion, which was slated to come up for discussion on March 8, on the table last week. Councillor Kim's motion called for a publication of all completed land transactions over the last five years be made available by the end of June.

?If we're going to release closed session minutes, I would like them to be detailed and full of colour and context,? he said. ?It should be for everything. You can't just pinpoint certain issues in closed session.?

When a transaction has been successful, he added, that is ?fair game for full disclosure,? but in this case, it was not. For Councillor Gaertner, that was a game changer.

?I strongly believe that any time the Town is involved in the buying and selling of land, especially when it is land that belongs to the public, the public should be very aware of what we have done,? she said. ?In this case, we didn't buy or sell any land, so I am against

this.?

Councillor Abel, however, was adamant that disclosure on this item is important for future discussion around the Precinct.

"It is very important when we talk about the Cultural Precinct plan that if there are reports that would support what and how that came about it would be available for that," he said. "There is a report in there I would like brought out. It has nothing to do with putting the Town at any sort of risk and if our Town Solicitor looked at it and said, 'I don't think it should be brought out,' and that would be his advice, I would support the solicitor."

Now the decision is in the hands of Aurora's CAO Doug Nadorozny.

Ultimately, Council voted unanimously to support an amendment from Councillor Gaertner and Councillor Jeff Thom to refer the matter to Mr. Nadorozny for a full report on the disclosure of closed session materials.