

Four step plan approved to reach Cultural Precinct, Library Square decision

By Brock Weir

There might soon be a light at the end of the tunnel for Aurora's proposed Cultural Precinct and the future of Library Square.

Council unanimously approved a four-step plan to bring the long-gestating projects in for a landing after years of indecision and, as far as the proposed Cultural Precinct is concerned, significant confusion.

The approved 'reboot' of the consultation process outlines four key 'milestones', the first of which came at last week's Council meeting which 'reaffirmed' Council's previous position on developing a Cultural Precinct and agreeing on how everything has transpired so far.

The second milestone will review the results of a re-purposing study on different buildings in the precinct envelope, with the third focusing on presenting concept plans, and the fourth charting a firm direction forward.

As Council once again tackled the issue of Downtown Revitalization it was important that a firm decision 'as long as it is a firm decision' move forward without delay. And, for many, there can't be a vision for a Cultural Precinct without a final decision on what to do with Library Square and the former Library and Seniors' Centre buildings currently on it.

'[We] are quite aware of the umpteen reports that all, at the end of the day, talk about the same thing since the new library was built: what do we do?' said Councillor Michael Thompson [in 2012] Councillor Buck brought forward a notice of motion that said, 'Let's deal with the old Library building and the old Seniors' Centre and essentially asked for the disposition of those buildings. The conversation around the table was 'Whoa, we are going too fast here. Let's go out to the public and get their thoughts because we don't want to knock down those buildings without knowing what we're going to put there in its place, so we went out to the public.'

Those conversations are still being had, money to repair the deteriorating buildings have been continually put off pending a decision on the buildings' futures, and those costs are mounting over time.

'At the heart of it all, the decision we, as a group, need to make is what are we doing with those two buildings? I can't speak for everybody else, but I am ready to make that decision tonight. 15 years to make a decision on what to do with those two buildings is absurd.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor Tom Mrakas who, along with Councillor Thompson, put forward the initial motion that got the ball rolling on the Cultural Precinct in the first place.

'At the end of the day, it is going to come down to the nine of us being locked into a room and deciding what we want to do, regardless of what a consultation says,' said Councillor Mrakas. I look forward to the day where all nine of us are in a room and we can make a decision.'

But, Council members have not yet been locked in that room to make that all-important decision on what their common vision is and, in the end, that was at the bottom of some reluctance offered by Councillor Jeff Thom.

While he said he appreciated the 'passion' around the table and had no problem with the proposed process, the vision presented near the start of the year by consultants is far off from his own.

'I am pro Cultural Precinct, I am pro revitalization of Downtown, we have to do something, and I implore this Council to do something, but I do not support or endorse the concept that has been presented by FOTENN. I am happy to make a decision on moving forward, but if my decision is this plan or nothing, I would much rather begin that rebooting process to articulate a Council vision for Library Square or the subsequent uses for other parts of the Cultural Precinct. We still haven't articulated what our vision

is. For me, I don't think that is good enough. We can do better as a community and Council to really do something positive, not only for the people of this neighbourhood, but all of Aurora.?

For Councillor Sandra Humfryes, going back to criticism of the FOTENN plan and focusing on the details within it is why it is going to take us another 15 years to do anything.? At the end of the day, she said, that is merely a guideline, and the residents are getting frustrated.

?What I am hearing from residents is, 'Please don't give up and move forward,'? she said, noting opposition from Trinity Anglican Church over a proposed reconfiguration of their parking lot to allow for a pedestrian thoroughfare. ?They need something in our Downtown Core and what they have seen they like. Without a guideline, we are going to start right back at square one. If we are closing the door on all the work that has been done, that is a real shame. We're just going to keep doing it and you can see why it has taken 15 or 20 years because we keep doing it. Let's put our guard down for a minute and just open our eyes to some of the positive things we can all align to and start somewhere.?

Added Mayor Geoff Dawe: ?I am in complete agreement that we need to move forward and I think we'll all keep on doing something. Even back to the last term, Councillor Ballard was taking about shared spaces and we're talking about a parking plan and how to change the streetscape in that part of Town to make it more accommodating and more attractive. I think we're all keen on doing that. We just have another way of getting there.?