

Library Square redevelopment gets \$38 million Council green light



By Brock Weir

It is billed as a downtown revitalization project that will see positive dividends for generations to come, and when Council sat down last Thursday to formally approve the estimated \$38.2 million redevelopment of Library Square last week, proponents hailed it as a "historic moment" for Aurora.

Council, at a Special Council meeting on Thursday night, voted 5 ? 2 in favour of moving forward with a new cultural and community space in Downtown Aurora, one which will include both a three-storey addition to the historic Church Street School and a multipurpose outdoor gathering space intended to be a year-round attraction.

"This is a pivotal point in our Town's history and one that will change the trajectory of our community," said Mayor Tom Mrakas in a statement following the meeting. "Our residents are excited about this project and I am incredibly proud of Council for working together to take this next step to move the project from concept to reality. In many ways, we are returning to the roots of our Town by bringing our downtown core back to its former glory and making it a dynamic community gathering space once again. We are investing in our community and I am confident this will encourage business to follow suit and invest in downtown Aurora."

The Mayor's comments echoed many of the positive comments offered by Council members last week, but despite both Councillors Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo offering support for the Library Square vision as a whole, financing and other details gave them cause to vote against the recommendation.

Once brought to

fruition, Library Square, which is located at the intersection of Church Street and Victoria Street in Aurora's Downtown Core, will boast a new public building connected to 22 Church Street, that will include a flexible performance hall for up to 250 people, studio and multipurpose spaces and archival facilities.

Outside, between the historic schoolhouse and the Aurora Public Library, plans include a refrigerated ice rink, water features, amphitheatre-style seating and a large open gathering space that planners say will be an ideal location for concerts, music festivals, public art displays, skating, food truck festivals and more.

The current capital budget for the Library Square redevelopment stands at \$38.2 million, which will be funded in a variety of ways. The final details of the funding strategy will be hammered out at a later date as over \$14 million of the funding is subject to grant approval by the Federal Government, but, as The Auroran reported last week, plans include a draw from reserve accounts, a \$3.5 million draw from the Town's Hydro Reserves, and a one-time tax increase of one per cent that could be phased in over three years.

"My problem is multifold, but my number one issue is the funding model," said Councillor Gallo, stating he was a huge proponent of the arts.

Councillor Gallo proposed a slight delay in approving the project until Aurora heard back from the Federal Government on how much money, if any, they would be receiving from the Canada Cultural Spaces grant program.

He said he was "jaded" on going forward with the funding model at this point after what he described as the "Joint Operations Centre fiasco" which saw numerous budget overruns and issues as the build continued.

"That is not an understatement," he said. "I went through it from the beginning and while I don't want to say this is the same process, my guard is up because I do not want that to happen again" and I don't think anyone wants that to happen again. To me, approving this without a solid funding plan is moving forward down that road, unfortunately."

Similar concerns were offered by Councillor Gaertner. While she said the Library Square redevelopment was "a very exciting opportunity" for Aurora and a "long time coming" there were still details to be considered.

She said she was heartened by comments delivered by planners at last week's meeting addressing the issue of underground water on the site, as well as components of the building that will have a positive impact on the environment, but parking was

still an outstanding concern that had to be tackled.

‘I think the taxpayers need to know there is going to be a one-time tax levy increase of one per cent [and it] looks like nobody has voted on or discussed it,’ she said. ‘It is going to cost the taxpayers more money, and hopefully they believe it will be a valuable tax increase, but I don’t think we can be silent on the fact we’re doing that.’

But, for other Council members, there were more positives than negatives.

Councillor Sandra Humfryes, for instance, said there is a ‘solid business plan’ on Library Square that underscores the ‘potential’ of what it will bring to Aurora and what the Town needs to do to make the venture completely successful.

‘This is what we have been talking about year after year, how to truly revitalize our downtown core,’ she said. ‘It has been a constant discussion and thought process, many consultations over the years, and it is time to do something. This is probably our last chance. If we don’t, then we might as well change the vision of downtown. We have gone so far, we have to continue to move forward and we have to be the one leading it.’

‘We have public input, we have heard the concerns on parking, soil, [and] water, but we have the right people in place to address those issues as we go along. I think it can be constantly looked at and constantly improved so it truly becomes something we’re all very proud of.’

The history of how long it has taken Council to get to this point was a continual theme in Council members’ remarks in favour of moving forward.

Councillor Harold Kim, for instance, said the ‘tide has turned.’

‘Some believe that one should not embark on a new strategy, a new build or an endeavour unless conditions are perfect and rarely are conditions perfect,’ he said. ‘Given this, there is always room for those who are fearful or trepidatious. I understand with a project of this scale, it can seem daunting. Consequently, there will always be those who are critical from conception to completion.’

‘It seems, to some, risk management is defined as avoiding risk all together as opposed to taking the right risk. I believe this is the right risk.’

It has been a ‘long

road," said Councillor Michael Thompson, and a "bit of a marathon with lots of steps to go away." While Thursday's approval is a step in the right direction, he noted there will be further steps along the way to guide the process.

"While progressing tonight, there are still other checkpoints as we go along," he said. "Keep in mind as we are making our decisions this evening there are still, as per the project schedule, two points this year whereby reports will come back to this Council and this Council will make a decision on whether or not to continue to proceed or not. Those that have concerns, those who may want to see other elements, there will be other opportunities along the way this year for you to make sure they have been addressed before we proceed to the next phase."

Added Councillor

Rachel Gilliland: "I was really shocked to hear that 93 meetings later since 2015 we finally made it here. I am so excited, I know the community is so excited, there are a lot of people who just can't wait for the shovel to hit the ground. It's still a long ways to go by the time we get to completion and I know we've got some more work to do, but I am so proud of all the hard work staff [and consultants] have done. We're on our way to revitalizing the downtown core. We're on our way and it is about time."

"Once we move ahead with this," concluded Mayor Mrakas, "I think you will see the floodgates open as far as businesses and people looking to invest and our downtown core will return to its past glory."