

Municipal Service Board rejected as option to run Library Square

The question of just how Library Square will operate once the multimillion-dollar redevelopment project is completed still remains unanswered, but last week's General Committee meeting went one step towards clarifying the matter.

Last week, Councillors rejected the possibility of establishing a Municipal Service Board (MSB) to oversee the operations of Library Square ? which would include 22 Church Street, the approved extension to the historic Church Street School building, and the gathering space planned between it and the Aurora Public Library ? in a way that is somewhat arm's-length from municipal operations.

?Under the MSB model, the Town would continue to own the lands and buildings at 22 Church Street and remain responsible for capital asset funding,? said Project Manager Phil Rose-Donahoe in his report to Council, noting that while an MSB model is unusual for cultural institutions owned by a municipality, it is a model that has been established in St. Catharines. ?Once established, the MSB would become the operator of the business, responsible for program and service delivery, facility rentals and bookings, establishing rates and fees, box office administration, financial operations, marketing and promotion, fundraising and employing and managing all employees and volunteers.

?Such a governance model would require the Town, through Council, to create a body that possesses the expertise at an operational level to implement the Library Square Business Plan and oversee the ongoing operations and programming of the facility. Council would also need to approve the criteria and competencies for the MSB and establish broad policies it needs to follow, thereby controlling the MSB's scope of authority to some extent.?

Building on his report in Council Chambers last week, Mr. Rose-Donahoe offered Council a number of pros and cons for this model ? and others ? and, as far as the MSB, the cons outweighed the pros.

On the plus side, an MSB would provide ?unified leadership and centralized direction?, a balance between municipal control and an independent board, the integration of existing staff and board members, and, in some cases, lower staff compensation.

On the other hand, there are few examples on which to compare this proposal for Library Square, an MSB could see a disruption to current program delivery, translate into a lengthier transition period for all employees, and limit fundraising potential.

?In analysing the MSB model, it has become increasingly clear that this model poses numerous challenges that make it the least feasible model for the future governance of Library Square,?

said Mr. Rose-Donahoe.

More feasible options, he said, are the adoption of a Direct Delivery system where the operations of Library Square would fall under the umbrella of the Town's Community Services Department, or a Not-For-Profit/Municipal Hybrid Model, one which is similar to the Town's current agreements with the Aurora Cultural Centre (ACC) for the purposes of delivering cultural programming to the community. (See sidebar)

If Council agrees that the MSB model is one that should not be pursued, the next step in the review process is to continue to work with key stakeholders to further explore the Direct Delivery and Not-For-Profit Municipal model to determine which one is the most feasible option for Library Square, said the Project Manager. This means continuing to work with stakeholders during a series of process mapping workshops, the purpose of which is to undertake a step by step analysis of the decision-making process for various, real world scenarios that would occur at Library Square.

Council ultimately agreed with his recommendation, tentatively rejecting the MSB model in a decision that is expected to be ratified at the end of the month.

Speaking in favour of exploring the Hybrid model further were Councillors Michael Thompson and John Gallo.

Since being on Council since 2010, the ACC has done everything Council has asked of them, said Councillor Thompson. They continue to build and improve upon the relationship [between themselves and the Town] and address issues, and I expect that to continue. I still think the current hybrid model we have in place is still the best path forward.

On his part, Councillor Gallo said he agreed with Councillor Thompson's views but questioned the purpose of the report and the recommendation to reject the MSB rather than to simply pick one of the three options to move forward.

I am just saying, let's make a decision and if it took a little bit more time [for a recommendation] I would have been okay with that, he said. I would have been prepared to make a decision even before this report, to be quite honest, but I am happy it is here and it is moving forward.

Mayor Tom Mrakas said he too was prepared to make a decision at the table.

I think maybe it is in the best interest to say, You know what? Let's task staff and say we're going to go for the non-profit municipal hybrid model and have them just specifically work on that, how they

can update that, how they can tweak that and give us the best proposal when it comes before us and we can look at that,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?I have gone through this, I have looked at it, I kind of see the one I like and from what I am hearing around the table, I think everyone is leaning towards one model over another. Maybe that is what we do and give staff the proper amount of time so we can have the best solution once the doors open.?

Added Councillor Rachel Gilliland: ?I do like the fact we have the opportunity to look at all three models and I think you did pick the right two. What I think we want for the Cultural Centre, if it ain't broke, why try to fix it??

Staff, however, cautioned that now is not the right time to make a final decision on Library Square's governance as more work needs to be done to hammer out just how ?the majority of new space? will be used and what the Town's responsibilities might be in the long run.

By Brock Weir