

Museum recommendations leave Historical Society 'disappointed'?



(St. Andrew's College cadets exercised their Freedom of Town on Sunday by parading down Yonge Street, turning into Our Lady of Grace Church in front of Hillary House. Auroran photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

Plans for a reinstated Aurora Museum are set to take a significant step ahead this week.

These plans, however, have left the Aurora Historical Society 'disappointed' in the way forward.

Councillors this week are due to consider a recommendation awarding museum services, and the stewardship of the Aurora Collection to the Markham-based Cultural Asset Management Group (CAM).

According to a report before Councillors at the Committee level this week from Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation, three bids were received to carry the Aurora Museum into the future, including CAM's winning bid, as well as proposals from the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) and Aurora Cultural Centre.

Working with \$100,000 earmarked by Council, potential bidders were required to submit proposals for 'museum management, exhibition development, collections management and a conservation program.' Requirements also include assisting in research requests, the continual building of archives, working for grants, and working alongside the Aurora Cultural Centre in which the museum space would be housed.

Bids were evaluated under four key criteria with 35 per cent weight each given to exhibition of artefacts and care of the collection, 25 per cent for fees, and 5 per cent for 'value added' incentives. CAM scored an 82.7, the AHS a 51.25, and the Aurora Cultural Centre a 47.

'The submission from Cultural Asset Management Group identifies a five-year commitment focusing on two components to operating a museum: (1) the exhibition of artefacts and (2) the care of the collection,' said Mr. Downey in his report. 'Their submission contains a number of unique opportunities to maximize access to the collection with an online presence and a 'beyond our walls' approach.

'CAM has identified a five-year financial commitment of \$556,200. Funding in the amount of \$100,000 is available. Additional funding will be required for future years to be allocated from the Council Discretionary Reserve Fund and placed in the Base Operating Budget.'

CAM is no stranger to the Aurora Collection, having been commissioned by the Town two years ago to work with the AHS on a complete inventory and appraisal of the thousands of items falling under that umbrella. They were also tasked with creating an exhibition last year to commemorate Aurora's Sesquicentennial.

Nevertheless, the recommendation has baffled AHS president John McIntyre who says he has been less than impressed with how CAM has handled the artefacts.

In recent weeks, Mr. McIntyre says he and Jacqueline Stuart have been going into the archives to help locate 900 objects within the collection which CAM was unable to find and put in the inventory.

‘Over the last few weeks, that has been bothering us and they are right there,’ says Mr. McIntyre. ‘I guess that sums up my feelings about the competence with the collection. When they did the inventory there were about 900 objects they said they couldn't find and they are right there under their nose. I don't think that really bodes well.’

The Aurora Collection was established by the AHS to curate and accept artefacts nearly 51 years ago. The ownership of the collection was transferred to the Town of Aurora last summer. The AHS recently came under controversy, however, asking for a \$20,000 increase in their municipal funding for 2014, and \$10,000 more than they received last year for Sesquicentennial activities.

Had the AHS been chosen to steer the museum forward, Mr. McIntyre says it would have brought Aurora's two museums ‘together again.’ If the CAM recommendation goes through, Hillary House would be more isolated and it is the ‘largest and most complex’ piece in the Aurora Collection.

‘We put forward our best argument,’ he said. ‘If the AHS had been granted the contract, we said to Town Staff it would probably mean we would not be coming back to the Town for as much support for Hillary House per se, but it leaves us in kind of a quandary there because I don't know that the Town will want to continue supporting both the museum at Hillary House and the Aurora Museum.’

CAM, on the other hand, brushes off any concerns that they might not be local or familiar with the collection and stress their deep roots within the community of one of the two partners, and their ‘intimacy’ with the items in the collection.

‘We did a review of every single thing in the collection and I was there intimately looking at everything, documenting everything, as well as putting a value on it and making a report which went to Council on our recommendations for conservation, exhibition and what needs to be done with the collection.’

‘We are intimately familiar with the collection. We do not have the 50 year history with the collection, but we can argue the AHS' membership has changed over those last 40 years as well. We're very excited to have this opportunity to work with the collection. We're very excited about the news and we have got plans for the community to be actively involved.’