

Theatre, studio space planned for Library Square addition

By Brock Weir

The future of Library Square could take a step forward this week with the approval of a three-storey addition to the Church Street School.

Tentatively approved by Council members at the Committee level last Tuesday, the modern addition, which would contrast with the heritage attributes of the historic downtown landmark, would include a new atrium, ample studio space, and a flexible 'black box' theatre with seating for 250.

Should the Committee's decision be ratified this week, work will begin on a new laneway and other components of Library Square to provide connectivity between the area's two anchor buildings - the Aurora Public Library and the Church Street School, home to the Aurora Cultural Centre and Aurora Museum & Archives - and commit funding for the addition, which will spur the design process. Final costs for the addition will become clear after the design process, at which time Council will make a firm commitment on how much money to allocate to the project, but architects estimate that a full-blown three storey addition and theatre could cost between \$14 million and \$17 million.

According to a presentation made last week by David Leinster of The Planning Partnership and architect Roland Rom Colthoff, the proposed final design includes a number of tweaks from original concepts presented to Council earlier this year.

Among these changes, the Aurora Public Library has agreed to move deliveries from the main entrance down to Church Street to facilitate the growth of Library Square, a restored 'drop-off' area to the Library, and a reconfiguration of accessible parking spaces. On the Square itself, principals are proposing a design that has 'the right dignity' that corresponds with the surrounding buildings. They likened the modern addition to the Church Street School to similar additions to landmarks such as Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music, which has become a landmark in and of itself.

While the complete package would cost upwards of \$17 million, smaller scale options were also on the table, including an addition for just a theatre and basement concept with an upset estimate of \$11 million, and an addition with just programmable space at a 'very rough' estimate between \$7 million and \$8 million.

Looking over the designs, Mayor Geoff Dawe said he thought the look of the new building was both 'complimentary' and 'substantially different' from what is there.

'What you have shown here is fabulous,' he said. 'I am very much in favour of the three-storey building. It is a Council decision, but I think the three-storey building gives us the most opportunity and the most flexibility in the long run.'

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: 'I think it is a fabulous idea and you have done an incredible amount of work [with] the residents and this Council, stakeholders, and I think you have come up with something everyone can be happy with and this is an exciting opportunity.'

Councillor Sandra Humfries was similarly enthusiastic.

'I can understand the challenge of [tweaking designs to fit into a heritage area], but this is absolutely going in the right direction,' she said. 'The key here was to create an attraction. It will absolutely create that and I am excited about all the potential programming space that we can have in the area. I think it is incredible.'

Others, however, showed a degree of skepticism when it came to integrating this modern element into an area largely defined by its heritage. Among those members was Councillor Jeff Thom who cited recent moves to put a modern addition onto Ottawa's landmark Chateau Laurier, a plan which has garnered no small degree of criticism and controversy.

'Our Church Street School is not the Chateau Laurier, but certainly it is the same kind of concept [of] how do we respectfully and tastefully put an addition onto an existing heritage building?' Councillor Thom said to the planners. 'Obviously, we're in the early stages and by no means is what you presented the final design, but you're well aware of the situation. Moving forward, perhaps I would like to see a design that is a bit more complimentary to the heritage attributes.'

Although Councillor Wendy Gaertner agreed the proposal was 'exciting,' she went a step further and called it an 'exciting work in progress,' asking for guarantees that the addition would not be higher than the existing Church Street School.

Planners told Councillor Gaertner that they could not necessarily guarantee that height at this point until all the mechanical elements were fully investigated.

'Our intention and the intention of the entire project team is that it not be taller than the rooftop, the widow's walk element of the existing schoolhouse,' said Mr. Colthoff. 'However, there are very large mechanical systems requirements for these buildings. They have 250 people in one room (the proposed theatre) and there is a lot of air to move back and forth. Right now, I cannot guarantee

[the height] because we have only just started with the mechanical engineers.?

This, however, gave Councillor Gaertner pause.

?I would say that [height restriction] is a requirement that it doesn't in any way overshadow the heritage building,? she said.