

Council approves increase in funding needed for Rotary Place senior centre project

By Rob Paul

With the current Rotary Place expansion in Bolton home to the Caledon Seniors Centre it was identified by staff last month there was a budget shortfall of \$1,627,056 for the project.

As a result, Council passed an amendment to a motion to provide the project with the additional needed funds to move forward, with a final report for the project set for the fall.

The building was constructed in 1995 and the Town has been operating it since 2011. It's the only dedicated seniors' facility in Caledon. There are over 900 members and, as the Town grows, so too does that need for space at the facility.

As part of the recent Age-Friendly Caledon Action Plan, it was forecasted that Caledon's senior population will increase by more than 10,000 by 2031, making the expansion of the Seniors Centre a priority.

The current facility is approximately 6,000 square feet with two program rooms, a kitchen, office space, washrooms, and storage. Staff reports have shown that based on expected growth, the expansion will be required to keep seniors in Caledon.

Mayor Allan Thompson was adamant that the Town has to do everything they can to continue with this project the way it was originally intended despite construction costs increasing as a result of the pandemic.

"We need to try and find the money," said Thompson. "I don't want to cut back and bastardize this thing. What we laid out originally was a plan and the seniors will even be at capacity with what we're building, and they need it now. My biggest concern is that we know we need this; it isn't that we're wasting money. We need to find the funds somewhere. We need to keep this on track and on schedule. I know construction costs have gone up, I get it, but I just don't want to be cutting. This is going to be well used so let's make sure we do it. We can find the funds without the taxpayer paying on this, we need to get this done."

Councillor Annette Groves, who sits on the Seniors' Task Force, has been working with the seniors on the expansion project for multiple years and thinks the pandemic has made it even more clear that this project needs to be completed the right way.

"The seniors are very concerned," Groves said. "This is very critical. Given the situation with the pandemic, many of the seniors haven't been given the opportunity to participate in any physical activities and anything social. They truly need this; I think they needed this 10 years ago."

Groves provided an amendment to the motion that the Council passed, which asked that the \$1,627,056 for the project be funded and pre-approved as part of the 2022 Budget and any of the shortfall from the Town's current Development Charges (DC) Background Study be recovered from a future DC Background study.

Council was in agreement that keeping an eye on the future and making decisions based on what will be needed down the road is far more important than assessing based on the current situation.

"I think it's important to echo Mayor Thompson's statement," said Councillor Nick deBoer. "Currently with the situation we're in economically, we're far better off to support plans that we need and find the money than decide to chop and reduce the size of the facility. History in Caledon has shown that when we do reduce the size of facilities, we really do back ourselves into a corner. We need to build what we need, even if we have to pay for it over time. These facilities are going to be in our inventory until the end of time, essentially. When you look at Inglewood Arena, we've owned it for well over 60 years probably. These are facilities we will have for a long time to invest income into to pay off any debt. I support building what we need and figuring out a way to fund what we need. This should provide staff with the confidence when they come back in the fall to know we're going to support what we

need.?

Given the rare circumstances of the pandemic, Council made it a point to look at how important having top-notch senior facilities are based on difficulty many seniors in Caledon have had over the last 15 months.

?This is something we definitely need to have happen and need to support,? said Councillor Tony Rosa. ?During the stay-at-home order over the last year, the limited engagement of seniors has effected people's physical and mental health with the inability to get out and socialize and do expanded programs. I think the seniors deserve an opportunity here as we get out of this pandemic to have a facility where we can expand programming and promote social gatherings. We can engage our seniors and get them out of their homes because they've been locked up way too long. I truly believe this is a need in our community.?

One concern that was brought up based on the growth in Caledon is whether this project alone will be enough for the senior community.

?We've all seen what our growth trajectory is going to be and how important it is to support our aging community,? said Councillor Jennifer Innis. ?We've seen the great work with our age-friendly community work that's come forward and this is a key priority within it, ensuring that there is a space for our seniors to continue to be active and engaged. I hate to say it, but it's already probably too small for what's coming. We're going to have to look at future spaces for our seniors. That's something we can discuss as we move forward. I hope this is a strong message to our senior community that this Council stands behind them in giving them their space.?