

Town trying to proceed with arts centre

By Bill Rea

Caledon is likely to have a Centre for the Arts eventually, even if things are not moving quite as fast as some had hoped.

Town councillors Tuesday agreed to direct staff to investigate options for a multi-use facility to be included in future capital plans, in keeping with the recommendations in a staff report. They also amended the motion to include consideration of all options, including interim solutions, be part of the 2018 budget discussions, and that staff continue to meet with representatives of the arts community and people interested in the matter. Those interested people include Bolton resident Antonio Rosa, who's been pushing for such a facility.

This came after roughly 90 minutes of discussion on the issue.

Rosa appeared before councillors Tuesday, passionately expressing his displeasure with the staff report and its recommendations. He charged a number of crucial details had been left out, including results of meetings he had taken part in with staff.

The report stated there had been a presentation to council in November 2015 on the proposed centre, and staff was directed to look into whether the Town should pursue establishing such a facility. Staff also looked into the possibility of utilizing existing community facilities. One of the ideas that had been considered was a lease option of the building that had been Caesar's Banquet Hall on Regional Road 50 in Bolton. A consultant was engaged to look into that, but based on their report, staff was not willing to recommend that option, opting instead for a 'purpose built' facility that would have to be included in future capital plans. Such an amenity is currently not in the Town's long-range capital plan.

Rosa, who put forth the original proposal, said an understanding came out of the 2015 meeting that he would work with staff, and that's what happened. He said he was working closely with Heather Savage, manager of recreation for the Town.

'She was very highly skilled,' he said. 'Very professional.'

But he said he was disappointed when he saw the staff report.

'I do believe it's a good start,' he commented, but added it left out a lot of important information. 'There are a lot of questions that are not answered.'

He cited work that had been done on a business plan, possible revenue sources and partnership opportunities. There had also been discussion of grant opportunities.

'It's got to be sitting somewhere,' he said.

Rosa also charged he had been shut out of the process 'because of some political baloney.'

He also said the public are going to get the idea that an arts centre is not doable because there's information they don't have access to. He added he's happy to continue working with staff, but some direction is needed.

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy recalled how enthused Rosa was 14 months ago, adding she would like more financial details of the proposal.

'I think you're absolutely right,' Councillor Annette Groves told Rosa, apologizing that he didn't have more of a part in the process. 'You've done a ton of work on this.'

She also asked about sponsors and investors for the project.

Rosa said he's had to put them off until he had supporting documents, adding he was hoping for more from the report. He added he has an active list of serious sponsors.

He also told Mayor Allan Thompson there was originally talk of a larger facility, on the order of a 300-to-400-seat theatre, but staff had suggested those expectations be scaled back to about 200 seats, with some secondary space, that would cost less than \$1 million. He added one-third of that could be funded from grants with another third coming from sponsorship. He added there are models of such sponsorship within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). He also envisioned the Town finding ways to fund the other third.

'It was to be a partnership that involved everyone,' he said.

He agreed his original proposal would have been a dream, which is why they scaled things back.

'Right now, we have zero,' he declared, telling Thompson the scaled back proposal could be used by community groups, schools, as well as for business meetings during the week. The idea is it would be a start of something that could answer needs for the next 10 years.

'I was prepared to make 200 seats work, if that was what it was going to take,' he remarked. 'We've got to start somewhere.'

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli wondered if reducing the seating would restrict the uses the facility could be put to. Rosa assured him that when artists are involved, they can get creative, adding the scaled back project is better than nothing.

He also told Mezzapelli there are 'three very serious' sponsorship opportunities. One has already been involved with projects in the

GTA, and another approached him. "It was amazing," he said.

He called the third a "very interested partner."

Councillor Johanna Downey said she understood the frustration Rosa was experiencing.

He said that's common in the arts community.

"We all experience some frustration," he told her, adding they'll also support each other's productions.

Downey commented that she didn't see the staff report as being particularly negative, adding it appears staff wants to keep the issue alive, with a longer range plan.

"You'd make a good car salesman," Councillor Gord McClure told Rosa.

Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives Laura Johnston told Thompson staff was told in 2015 to keep working with Rosa. Their last meeting was at the end of August. They were working on a report and brought in a theatre consultant to offer input. She added the report doesn't stop the process. Staff is keeping doors open while doing due diligence.

Thompson commented he attended a function a couple of weeks ago at a arts and culture hub in Milton. He was told that project started once the population in Milton reached a certain level. He said Caledon has to think about the future, while also providing for what's needed now.

Groves was concerned the public would get the idea that such a facility will cost a fortune. But she said no municipality is trying to build an arts centre on its own because they can't afford it. Partnerships are important in something like this.

"Right now, you just build what you can afford," she said.

Shaughnessy said this could be an opportunity to test the market for such a facility, adding it could be incorporated into the Bolton Residential Expansion Study (BRES).

Mezzapelli said he didn't see the report as being negative either, agreeing it's important for the Town to do its due diligence.

Councillor Jennifer Innis wasn't keen on the idea of using the proposal to test the market.

But she did agree more discussion is needed, pointing out there's been no mention of the Bolton Camp property.