Aylmer council votes 5-1 for library expansion

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programs became available.

As for tax spending, the 2026 town budget would not be affected by a decision to proceed, he said. "This is looking toward the future."

Cr. Oslach said the library debate had been going on for too many years. "It's time to settle it."

He had read the dozens of written submissions that had been received from the public and was in favour of proceeding with the Old Town Hall expansion.

He feared losing the library would lead to a derelict downtown.

Simcoe used to have a great downtown core, he lamented, but businesses had moved out.

"Downtown Simcoe is a ghost town," he said. "Do we want the same thing for Aylmer?"

Cr. Jamie Chapman said the County of Elgin raised the library issue this term, not Mayor Couckuyt.

If the town didn't have a larger space for the Aylmer library by the end of the current lease as of Jan. 1, 2028, "It will not be good."

Her decision was based on many factors, such as watching children over the years walking back and forth from town schools to the downtown library.

That just wouldn't happen at the Complex, she said. It was too far away, and Thames Valley District School Board didn't have funding for buses for day trips.

The economic value of having the library downtown "is huge," she said.

As for a public delegation from Johnny Friesen who spoke earlier in the meeting about growing up poor in Aylmer, and walking to the library for access to computers because his parents didn't have a car, she responded, "That still happens.

"What about a single mom who doesn't have transportation? I was one of them."

Having the best library in the world wouldn't matter if no one could reach it, she stated.

If the library was moved to the Complex, "We are losing so much," including $30,000 a year in rent that Elgin County paid for its current space at Old Town Hall.

Occupying Imperial Hall full-time would also deter hockey tournaments using the Complex, because they needed the additional space, and the same with summer hockey schools.

Cr. Chapman continued, "To me, a community is about treating everyone equally."

The downtown expansion would be expensive, she allowed, but like buying a new home, purse strings might have to be tightened, but when it was paid off in 15 or 16 years, 'You have something wonderful."

Cr. Desrosiers said that keeping the library downtown would be easier for those who resided in that area, but not those from other areas. "To me, it's a wash."

She agreed with Mr. Friesen, who had suggested that he wouldn't let his daughters walk to the library wherever it was, over concerns about safety on modern streets.

Some parents couldn't take the time to drive their children to the library, she continued, because they were working two or three jobs.

"Because of our economy, the cost of living," she said. To pay a property tax increase for the downtown expansion, "They're probably going to have to get a fourth job."

She also accused Cr. Chapman being "disconnected from the realities of our financial state."

Paying off a house was no longer possible in 15 or 16 years, Cr. Desrosiers said.

As for provincial and federal grants, they were no longer being directed toward cultural assets like libraries, she said.

Mayor Couckuyt said if the town didn't provide 10,000 square feet downtown for a library, "It will go somewhere else," possibly to the Complex or even to a private rental space.

"That would be a crying shame for downtown Aylmer," he believed.

As for claims the town couldn't afford the project, Aylmer's finance director hadn't yet had a chance to put numbers together, including how the expansion would be paid for, he said. "We can finance this," as the town had done with development of a new industrial park, the Elk Street reconstruction project this year and the recent building of a new water tower.

"Each one of those is a library," he declared.

As for running for office on the basis he wouldn't raise the library as an issue, "I kind of got pushed into it by the county."

He believed part of the problem was a fundamental misunderstanding about what libraries were.

They weren't just about books. "It's a place where people can go and have a 'third place'," outside their homes and workplaces.

"It's a pity that it's just about money," he said.



Tyler Desrosiers stopped and gestured to the Express photographer as he left the Wednesday, Oct. 15 Aylmer council meeting, held at Old Town Hall Theatre. Moments earlier, council had voted 5-1 to proceed with an expansion to the building. Councillor Kathryn Desrosiers, his wife, was the only vote opposed. After the vote he shouted from the gallery toward council: "You're all full of shit." Then, "Fuck you!" and he left the meeting. (AE/John Hueston)



About 75 members of the public attended an Aylmer council meeting, held in the theatre at Old Town Hall rather than the council chamber to accommodate more spectators, on Wednesday night, Oct. 15. Several spoke on whether to keep the Aylmer branch of the Elgin County library through an expansion of Old Town Hall, or to move to existing space in Imperial Hall room at East Elgin Community Complex. (AE/Rob Perry)

Public mixed on what to do about Old Town Hall library

by Rob Perry
of The Aylmer Express

Delegations and written submissions in "unprecedented" numbers gave the public a chance to have their say in the future of Aylmer library and Old Town Hall.

Mike Sereda, speaking on behalf of Aylmer Performing Arts Council (APAC) said the group took no stand on the library portion of the proposal, but did support the theatre improvements offered in Option 1 of architectural drawings provided to council and the public, which would include accessible washrooms on the second storey, a large lobby where theatre-goers could congregate, improvements to the kitchen just off the theatre and a separate entrance to the opera house from the front door.

APAC had been staging live performances in the theatre for over 30 years, and had developed the reputation of providing a friendly, community-based atmosphere "in one of the most intimate venues in Canada.

Whatever was done, he said, should keep the "perfect acoustics" of the existing 185-seat opera house.

APAC and Kids & Company, an associated group that brought live children's entertainment to town, were the most frequent renters of Old Town Hall at nine performances a year. Theatre-goers were both local and visitors to the area and shopped and ate downtown and visited local attractions as well as going to shows, he continued.

Mr. Sereda stated that some at the council meeting could remember when, in the late 1970s, the Old Town Hall was at risk of being torn down, but in the end was restored.

"We're at such a moment," he concluded.

Bryanna Kamermans spoke against the proposals to keep the Aylmer library downtown, through a costly expansion or renovation and expansion of that building to accommodate a larger town library, as well as to make improvements to the second-storey theatre.

She supported a proposed move, if additional library space was a necessity, to the Imperial Hall at East Elgin Community Complex.

"The need isn't for more specialized downtown space, but for accessible space affordable to everyone."

She saw better ways to use millions of dollars that would otherwise be spent on expanding the library downtown, including investing in town parks, Aylmer's outdoor pool and the local food bank.

She "absolutely believed" in preserving Old Town Hall, she said, "But we can do it without bankrupting the town."

Businessman Johnny Friesen, a realtor and landlord, recalled how, as a child, he had to walk to the library because his parents didn't have a car, nor a computer at home.

He'd known very little English, and resided in low-income housing on Melanie Drive.

To complete all his schoolwork, from a young age he had to walk to the downtown library, and the streets were safer in the 1990s. He and his own family now resided relatively close to the library, but he wouldn't let his daughters walk alone there.

He recalled he met crossing guard Donna Lauzon, also the town's parking enforcement officer at the time, at the library.

"She taught me not to have a victim mentality," he said. "She was one of the first mentors I had in this community."

But times had changed, he said. He was reading his speech from his cell phone, and had used artificial intelligence to help improve it.

Computers were everywhere, he said, and residents didn't need the library for them.

Many children now going to the library, like his daughters, were home-schoolers who didn't believe in the established public school system.

He estimated about 120 home-school students continuously visited the library, which now was "more of a place to join and gather and show community."

Despite that, he said, "We can't let this beautiful heritage site overwhelm our citizens with a tax burden.

Moving the library to the Complex could save a lot of money, he urged.



Aylmer council members took to the stage in the Old Town Hall opera house for a meeting on Wednesday, Oct. 15. They voted 5-1 to proceed with detailed planning for an $8.9-million renovation and expansion of that building to accommodate a larger town library, as well as to make improvements to the second-storey theatre. (AE/Rob Perry)





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