

## Leave the Mill St. library alone

By Mike Baker

Orangeville's brand spanking new Parks and Recreation Master Plan has certainly ruffled some feathers since being released to the public a couple of weeks ago.

The 520-page document, compiled by Toronto-based consultancy firm thinc design (that's not a typo by the way, their company name is all lower case), included a multitude of recommendations, from drastically changing space at Tony Rose arena, to improving almost all community parks and playgrounds in the municipality. Chief amongst its suggestions though, was a proposal to completely revamp the Alder Recreation Centre.

This isn't entirely new news for Orangeville residents. Last December, local Council directed Town staff to submit an application under the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP), which would see the provincial and federal governments combine to provide almost \$26 million of a proposed \$35 million redevelopment of the local arena.

That application including a proposal to develop a 35,000 sq. ft. double ice pad, expand the swimming pool from six lanes to eight lanes, install an indoor splash pad and complete a variety of behind-the-scenes infrastructure and facility upgrades at the site. It also included plans to upgrade the multi-purpose room space currently used by Humber College, and upgrade the existing public library space.

It's certainly an ambitious project, and one that relies entirely on the provincial and federal governments kicking in funds. Still, the Town is going to have to come up with around \$9 million of its own money if the project, as it is currently proposed, is to go ahead. More on my thoughts on that later.

The reason that initial proposal didn't particularly make waves at the time was because, while it included plans to upgrade the library space at Alder, it didn't call for the closure of the popular downtown library space on Mill St. That's where thinc design went wrong.

In the weeks since the new Parks and Recreation Master Plan was published, local Council has received almost 100 letters or notes from community members outraged by the thought of the Mill St. library being shuttered. It should be noted, no member of Council has gone on record to say they believe the space should be closed, although Mayor Sandy Brown did say he believed Orangeville only needed one library in his 2018 mayoral campaign.

While 100 people is, admittedly, only a tiny amount of Orangeville's overall population, the fact that so many people were inspired to share their thoughts on the potential closure of the Mill St. library is noteworthy. While many people attended the various meetings and debates surrounding last year's policing debate, a hugely significant issue, to my memory there wasn't anywhere near 100 different people voicing their opinion on the issue.

One of our regular columnists, Anthony Carnovale, once told me a library is the heart and soul of a community, and I tend to agree. It's a space anyone can enjoy, and serves a multitude of purposes, other than simply allowing people to borrow a few books. The Mill St. library underwent significant renovations toward the end of 2016, and is a beautiful space right in the downtown core. In my opinion, it should be left alone.

Now, back to the proposed renovations to the Alder Recreation Centre. I have no doubts it's a project that will bring big benefits to the community, and will help the municipality avoid spending millions upgrading the ice pad and swimming pool at Tony Rose Arena, but I think there are other areas the Town could better spend their \$9 million.

It's no secret that Orangeville needs a new fire hall. In fact, it's something that has been included on their long-term capital budget for as long as I've been a reporter here. For years, the fire hall project has been passed over, with many councillors commenting that,

while it would certainly be a nice thing to fund, there just isn't enough money laying around to justify doing it. While \$3 million was set aside in the 2020 budget for the new fire hall project, much of that will fund design work, and the purchase of any land that becomes available that could serve as a potential home for the new building. As of press time, no such purchase has been made, and there have been murmurs amongst Council, notably from Mayor Brown, that it may be more worthwhile to renovate the existing building rather than construct a new one.

Make no mistake, this is a project that is going to require another \$6 million or \$7 million to complete. While the Town isn't exactly flush with cash at this point in time, that could be about to change now that the municipality is set to transition its community policing services to the OPP. Well, I say change, but it's a change we won't see for several years. It's been estimated we won't see the benefits of that decision until 2025.

So, we're likely looking at another four years, at least, of our local fire department operating out of their cramped, outdated space on Dawson Road. A Fire Master Plan published in 2015 recommended Orangeville start the construction of a new fire station by 2018, while local Fire Chief Ron Morden has said on more than one occasion that building a new fire hall is an absolute necessity. Forgive me, but if the head of an emergency service provider says something is 'absolutely necessary', then I'd be inclined to do all I can to give it to him.

Money doesn't grow on trees, and Orangeville residents are already amongst the highest taxed in the GTA. My gut tells me that, right now, we can't have both a new fire hall and a renovated recreation centre. While it would be nice to improve the Alder Rec Centre, the facility as it stands today is still in pretty good shape. The same can't be said for the local fire hall. If I'm looking at investing around \$9 million in a local facility any time soon, I know where I'd be putting my money.