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New Huron County building estimated to cost \$18.8 million - Jan. 24, 2019

BY SHAWN LOUGHLIN

Huron County Council is one step closer to pulling the trigger on a new Huron County administration site at an estimated cost of over \$26.5 million.

The building itself, estimated by Jason Morgan of Allan Avis Architects, is expected to cost \$18.8 million, while other associated costs and variables could tally up an additional \$7 million.

The site chosen for the new building is on Gibbons Street on the south end of the former Victoria Public School property in Goderich. The north end of the lot is now home to a hotel.

Morgan, in his presentation to Huron County Council at its Jan. 16 meeting, said there are a number of factors to be considered with the building's construction, including putting council chambers front and centre in the new 60,000-square foot structure.

He said the building should appropriately represent Huron County. The design, form materials and methods of construction, he said in his report, should represent the traditions and heritage of Huron County and local and regional building materials where possible.

The building, he said, should be open and welcoming to the public and staff and not opposing or closed-off in its appearance. It should enhance public service, encourage good mental and physical health and be accessible to everyone. Physical barriers in the building should be limited, he said, and universal design principles should be used throughout.

He said that occupant wellness should also be top of mind, ensuring good indoor air quality, operable windows and natural lighting to enhance the quality of interior spaces for staff and visitors. Of utmost importance, Morgan said, should be the county's environmental leadership, employing energy-efficient, good quality building techniques which will demonstrate performance and proven savings realized over time.

He said that the building could be certified in a green building program, such as passive house or net zero, or it could simply utilize some of these methods to ensure maximum efficiency.

He also said that the building could generate energy through solar as well.

According to estimates in Morgan's report, the new building would use \$57,000 worth of energy per year, while the county's existing five buildings currently use \$90,000.

The new administration building would use 336,000 kilowatt hours per year, compared to 440,000 at the county's five existing buildings. The real difference, however, will be in the use of fossil fuels. While the county currently uses 869,000 kilowatt hours in fossil fuels per year, the new building would use under 300,000.

Morgan said the site will have ample room for parking for both staff members and the public and the potential for landscaping on the site as well. The site will have built-in potential for staff expansion, while it will also be conducive to further building expansion in the future if the need arises.

Expansion, if necessary, would be vertical, he said, adding another 3,000 square feet per floor as needed.

The building, Morgan said, would utilize open office concepts to encourage a collaborative environment among the employees.

He also said that the new council chambers will be versatile and available to other county bodies or committees to be used when there isn't a council meeting. He also said that it could be divided for smaller boards and further usage, or opened to the lobby to welcome members of the public into the space.

While a traffic study will be completed for Gibbons Street, Morgan said there weren't any concerns from neighbours when there was a school on the block, so he anticipated that the traffic plan would find the site conducive to the level of traffic the building would bring to the site.

While Morgan's presentation was met with universal enthusiasm among councillors, Central Huron Deputy-Mayor Dave Jewitt turned an eye towards the county's former home at the Huron County Courthouse, asking if the county had a guarantee that it would be occupied if the county vacated it. Director of Social and Property Services Barbara Hall said that the county's lease with provincial court services expires at the end of the year, so negotiations for a new lease are set to begin again in the coming months. In the past, she said, the county has been signing five-year leases with the organization since the 1970s.

Jewitt said he would feel better about the new building proposal if he knew another five-year lease would be in place for the courthouse. He also wanted to ensure that the space being vacated by the county would be of use to the courthouse.

Huron East Mayor Bernie MacLellan said that the last time it had been discussed, court services expressed a desire to have more space. Furthermore, he said there had been interest from local law firms that wanted to establish offices in the building as well, so he wasn't concerned in regards to renting the space.

Council moved to call a meeting of the county's facilities review committee as soon as possible, so it could review the proposal and then bring a recommendation back to Huron County Council in the coming weeks.