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Pile of reports, mounds of questions

Council faced with hundreds of pages of information from panel

By Joanne Chianello and Neco Cockburn, The Ottawa Citizen June 10, 2010 [Comments \(4\)](#)

OTTAWA—Five hours of briefing and discussions over reports outlining the viability of the Lansdowne Park redevelopment left city councillors with more questions than answers Wednesday.

Literally hundreds of pages of information were tabled near the end of the council meeting. They covered recommendations from the design review panel on what should change in the commercial development part of the Lansdowne site, to a transportation feasibility study, to a peer review report of proposed retail strategies.

But councillors didn't get a chance to read any of it before listening to an overview from city manager Kent Kirkpatrick and city treasurer Marian Simulik about what those reports contained.

That left even councillors generally in favour of the Lansdowne project complaining that Wednesday's meeting was unnecessarily long and generally unhelpful.

"What's going to be helpful is reading these two binders," said Councillor Jan Harder, pointing to the door-stopper reports. "What you heard today was the rehashing of a lot of the same questions we've heard 57 times."

The answers are now expected next Thursday at a special council meeting. At that time, councillors will also hear from pollster Nanos Research what Ottawa residents think about the proposals put forward by the Ottawa Sports and Entertainment Group, which is behind bringing a CFL team to town and developing the commercial part of Lansdowne.

Councillor Rainer Bloess anticipates that the June 17 meeting will be more contentious, "once people will have gone through the reports."

He said, "The financials are a starting point, but in the end, people around this table have to be convinced that those

financials make sense.”

So far, they don't make sense to Councillor Diane Deans, who questioned the city treasurer's report that the project was revenue neutral and asked about other elements of the plan that could cost the city millions. “We don't have any line-by-line assessment of these costs,” she said.

Some of the major highlights of the reports tabled Wednesday include:

Financing

More than any other issue, councillors were preoccupied with the cost of the Lansdowne project and how the city would pay for it. The answer wasn't simple — and a number of councillors said we don't have the full story yet — but here are the basics of what Simulik told council Wednesday.

The city is on the hook for \$129 million to refurbish Frank Clair Stadium and build underground parking. This was supposed to be revenue neutral, and Simulik said it is. The first \$10 million the city will recover by charging for “air-rights,” (development fees for the right to use or build in space above the ground, such as in a multi-level building). The remaining \$119 million would be funded through long-term debt.

The servicing of that debt would cost about \$91.9 million, adjusting for currency devaluation over 30 years — which is considered the lifespan of the project.

But the city expects to be paid an estimated \$21.7 million over the next three decades from OSEG in a detailed waterfall scheme. And it would have paid \$48 million for the stadium over the next 30 years, costs that were already accounted for.

When these two measures are accounted for, the shortfall for servicing the debt is only \$22 million. This will be paid for by 37 per cent of the property taxes that OSEG is expected to pay to the city, with the rest of the expected \$59.5 million in taxes going to the city coffers.

Councillor Alex Cullen called this a “shell game” that amounted to the city subsidizing its own debt servicing.

The funding for the urban park — which is now being estimated at \$35 million once the portions covered by the National Capital Commission and Parks Canada are taken into account — and another \$8.5 million for a proposed trade show centre were never to be part of the revenue-neutral scheme.

But Simulik said long-term debt servicing for both these projects would only increase the city budget by an estimated \$3 million in 2012 — representing a property tax increase of one-quarter of one percentage point.

Design Recommendations

The three-member design review panel said OSEG should not be allowed to go ahead with the small retail building it's proposing for the eastern end of Holmwood Avenue because it is too close to the public park space.

And whereas the OSEG design calls for a wide esplanade along Bank Street that would include some commercial space, the panel recommends more residential units, as well as retail and other commercial frontage to “intensify urban life along the east side of Bank.”

The panel also warned that the programming for the commercial development “is equally important to the physical structures.” On June 17, the

OSEG team is to give councillors a firm idea of what kind of tenants they expect at the redeveloped Lansdowne, which critics have charged is little more than a shopping mall.

While the current OSEG design is “greatly improved from the plans submitted to council in the summer of 2009,” the panel believes a number of single-storey buildings around the Aberdeen Pavilion and the Horticulture Building — both heritage sites — crowd the area. The panel recommends removing those buildings, and making up for the lost commercial space elsewhere on the site, especially along Bank.

Currently, architects for the OSEG commercial design and the winning plan for the public park, which was decided in a separate process, are working to merge their two visions for the site. One stumbling block will be the Horticulture Building,

which OSEG wants to move.

The design review panel did not say which option it preferred, but stipulated that if it were to be moved, there is only one place it could go, north and slightly east of the Aberdeen Pavilion — where OSEG proposes putting it.

Transportation Feasibility

According to a transportation feasibility study, the city's transportation systems can handle day-to-day traffic to the redeveloped site, but rush hours and Saturdays could be challenging.

The report found that access to the site from Queen Elizabeth Driveway would be highly desirable and would reduce the number of vehicles cutting through the nearby neighbourhood.

City staff has negotiated an agreement with the NCC for a three-year pilot project for a special-event shuttle that would allow for limited use of the road.

Staff has also secured or is in the middle of negotiating off-site parking agreements at nearby properties.

The transportation impact and assessment study was conducted by McCormick Rankin Corp. and underwent a peer review that found the consultants' work to be thorough.

The impact of special events on transportation would depend on their size, and that shuttles, parking restrictions, road closures and increased frequency on transit routes would help with bigger events.

Transit, cycling and off-site parking should be encouraged for special events. The study even suggested that transit, off-site parking, shuttle services and secured bike parking could be included in event ticket. If that happened, it's estimated the price of a ticket would increase between 60 cents and \$5 per ticket, depending on the size of the event.

Retail Peer Review

A strategy for a "unique urban village" at Lansdowne will create a unique destination and fit in with area businesses, according to consultants Malone Given Parsons.

MGP conducted a peer review of the retail strategy for the site, and supported an earlier report by J.C. Williams Group that called for an "urban village" made up of stores, cafés, restaurants, cinemas and cultural facilities that complement others in the area.

The J.C. Williams strategy "would allow for a specific commercial destination as well as a complementary and supportive function with the Glebe and Bank Street businesses," according to MGP's report.

And a 360,000-square-foot retail and commercial component is "warranted and viable."

The consultants dismissed an earlier report by Market Research Corp. prepared for the Glebe Business Improvement Area — which found that the area can't sustain nearly as much new trade as the Lansdowne plan proposes — claiming that its methodology was flawed and its "findings and conclusions cannot be relied upon."

Catherine Lindquist, executive director of the Glebe BIA, said she needed to review MGP's report, but her group stands by the work of its consultant.

Lindquist said she's still concerned about the potential size of the retail and commercial space and wants details about the tenants and types of retail being proposed.

"We need to be convinced that we can sustain that," she said.

Kirkpatrick told councillors that OSEG has been encouraged to "be as definitive as they can be" about potential tenants during the June 17 meeting.

Kirkpatrick said OSEG representatives have told him they intend to provide as much information as possible, but some companies they're negotiating with won't want their names mentioned.

Other points of note

Ottawa Farmers' Market: City staff said negotiations should continue with the farmers' market regarding the use of Lansdowne, focusing on financial details, governance and the mix of vendors. Any agreement must ensure a more formalized reporting structure between the market and the city. The outdoor market should also become a permanent part of Lansdowne's front lawn and be held at least two days per week with more days possible, and an indoor component should be gradually introduced. An agreement is to be presented to council for consideration next year.

Ottawa Art Gallery: City staff recommend pursuing the option of providing a new space for the art gallery as part of the Lansdowne redevelopment, and say further details could be included in an Arts Court redevelopment report that's expected to be considered by council in July.

Media leaks: A number of councillors wanted to know how certain details of the Lansdowne plan — including the winner of the international design competition for the urban park — found their way into the public realm before reaching the ears of public officials. Kirkpatrick apologized to council, as well the jurors who all signed confidentiality agreement, and said he was investigating the matter.

What's next

June 12 — The last day to comment on the OSEG design for the stadium and commercial component of Lansdowne Park at ottawa.ca

June 14 — Public consultation over Sylvia Holden Park

June 17 — Special city council meeting to discuss details of the Lansdowne development proposal; further financial feasibility report to be tabled

June 24 and 25 — Public delegations present to council

June 28 — Council to vote on the entire Lansdowne plan

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