

SAULT STE. MARIE

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Mayor backs downtown police building

Author of the article:

Brian Kelly

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Chief Hugh Stevenson and Mayor Christian Provenzano speak at Sault Ste. Marie Police Service's satellite office at Station Mall in June 2019. BRIAN KELLY SunMedia

Mayor Christian Provenzano backs building a new police station downtown if research determines a new home for the municipal service is needed.

But he acknowledges his position may not be shared by others should the decision be made to break ground on a new home for Sault Ste. Marie Police Service.

Police brass have repeatedly highlighted woes at the 53-year-old building on Second Line East for nearly a decade.

Bob Davies, then chief, called police headquarters “a money pit” in 2013.

Insp. Mike Davey called the building’s HVAC system “troublesome” causing half the building to be too hot, the other too cold in 2018.

Chief Hugh Stevenson told Sault Ste. Marie Police Services Board last fall the HVAC system is “failing” and replacement parts are difficult to find because of the unit’s age.

Provenzano told city council at an online meeting last Monday the existing building must be assessed to find out if it “can be retrofitted to suit the needs (of the police department)” and at what price.

“Then you would compare those costs to the cost for what a new building is,” he said.

Provenzano, as mayor, is a police services board member. Should a study find a new building is best, he expects the police department will want its new home to be based where responses to calls can be best made. He favours downtown.

“I think that there would be, obviously, some significant interest on the police service’s part to make sure that the building was located in a really strategic location that could access across the city effectively,” Provenzano told council. “I would like to see, if a new building is built for the police services, I would like to see that building built in the downtown. I would like to see all those employees brought into the downtown core. I think there’s a lot of sense to locate in the downtown. That’s my personal perspective. It’s not necessarily a perspective that will carry the day.”

Provenzano acknowledged a possible new home for the police department has to be built “where it makes most sense independent of any specific person’s desire to locate the building in a specific place.”

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker agrees the existing police headquarters should be assessed before a decision is made to put up a new structure. He’s an even bigger booster of building downtown.

“There certainly seems to be the perception that the majority of the calls the police services respond to are from the downtown area, so locating it in an area near where the majority of the calls are would make some sense,” he said. Shoemaker wants a downtown location to be chosen

“early on in the process so that there is not scouting of locations outside of the downtown parameters.”

A police building downtown would encourage safety in the area and revitalize downtown, Shoemaker adds.

The police department officially opened its JUMP satellite office at Station Mall in June 2019.

City of Sault Ste. Marie is checking for funding sources to help cover the cost of ambassadors to start working downtown during business hours. They would assist the public and be trained in CPR, mental health first aid and administer naloxone. Volunteers may be sought to be downtown after paid ambassadors end their day and before patrols by a security company start, said deputy CAO Tom Vair. Security cameras and patrols are also being considered to improve safety downtown.

Ward 1 Coun. Sandra Hollingsworth called downtown “our fun area” with “wonderful projects” planned including a new transit terminal and plaza planned.

“Safety, if we can just nail this down where our whole community is feeling more comfortable coming downtown,” she said. “I think that should still be our No. 1 concern.”

Ward 2 Coun. Luke Dufour asked if extra street lighting could be part of the municipality’s downtown safety strategy. That can be considered, said Vair, alongside crime prevention through environmental design when police offer business owners tips to reduce the chance of burglaries.

Dufour is concerned about Bill C-75, a federal law allowing accused who would previously be held in custody to be released.

“We really need to see some kind of change, or movement, in terms of the kind of people who are being released into our downtown and into our community,” he said.

More information about the city’s proposed downtown safety strategy is expected in the fall.

btkelly@postmedia.com