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## Sault Ste. Marie's downtown transit terminal amalgamating with Huron Street office

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Sault Ste. Marie's city council has voted 7-4 in favor of amalgamating the downtown bus terminal with its transit office. Elaine Della-Mattia

Sault Ste. Marie's main bus terminal will be moving to Huron Street, as recommended by city staff.

A lengthy debate that saw city council weigh the pros and cons of the move, and discuss three resolutions on the same issue resulted in a 7-4 vote giving staff permission to issue a request for proposal to obtain a consultant to complete construction drawings and administer the tender process for the renovation/build at 111 Huron Street.

The decision will result in the amalgamation of transit services under one roof, provide a larger facility for users and staff, increase accessibility, washroom facilities, improve public safety and create efficiencies.

Most importantly, councillors in favor of the proposal argued, it keeps the terminal downtown, close to merchants, businesses, recreational and tourist locations in a growing canal district.



Sault Ste. Marie's city council has voted 7-4 in favor of amalgamating the downtown bus terminal with its transit office. Elaine Della-Mattia

Council quickly nixed a motion moved by councillors Matthew Shoemaker and Matt Scott to embark upon an expanded environmental assessment process that would examine the reconstruction of the existing Dennis Street terminal and alternate downtown terminals including the former Algoma Canyon Tour Train depot.

Shoemaker argued that he believed a number of alternatives should be pursued before council makes a final decision and all logical spaces should be examined. An expanded EA would allow for more public input and satisfy the concerns council has heard in recent months.

But city staff noted the government funding received for the project cannot be used for land purchases, which would be required if either the Dennis Street site or the Huron Street transit office facility was not utilized, creating more costs for taxpayers.

“It would be irresponsible to look elsewhere other than the two locations the city owns,” said Ward 2 Coun. Lisa Vezeau-Allen. “Therefore I do not support Coun. Shoemaker’s motion.”

The two movers of the motions were the only ones who supported it.

The Huron Street location has been considered a preferred location dating back to studies in 2018, when four possible scenarios were evaluated.

That was enough for Ward 2’s Luke Dufour, who said he was comfortable with the report and the studies completed by staff to make his decision based on the best options for taxpayers.

Coun. Rick Niro, a proponent who has said he wants to see the Huron Street bus barns amalgamated in a building at the Public Works site on Sackville Road, penned a second motion with wardmate Marchy Bruni.

The Ward 4 councillors wanted to see a new building constructed on the Dennis Street site to satisfy concerned Queen Street merchants who fear they’ll lose customers with the bus terminal’s move.

Niro said he didn’t expect any change in riderships with either location chosen and he recognizes “lost opportunity” if the terminal isn’t moved to Huron Street but alternatively, he wants to see city council invest in the ‘traditional’ downtown Queen Street like many private property owners have.

“We have spent significant staff time and money and urged people to move downtown, to stay downtown and to spend money on their buildings downtown and now it is our turn to do something downtown. I have a hard time turning our backs and walking away,” he said.

Niro said he doesn’t expect the bus barns to stay on Huron Street forever and believes they will be moved sometime in the future.

Other councillors aren’t so sure, especially when the cost to move the bus barns are estimated to cost about \$60 million – well behind the need for a new police station or fire hall on the capital expenditure list.

Bruni said he wants to listen to the businesses who need patrons and wants to keep the terminal at its current location.

“We need to continue to support the Queen Street area,” he said.

Ward 5 Coun. Corey Gardi said he took issue with two business groups arguing at the opposite end of the spectrum. The canal district group doesn’t want the facility near their area because they fear losing business and Queen Street merchants want to retain the terminal to ensure businesses can be accessed.

Gardi took the position that he believes all will be well served if the terminal is moved to Huron Street and the move will also provide an opportunity to grown the canal area and gateway area and provide more people with an opportunity to access that area.

Ward 1 Coun. Sandra Hollingsworth agreed, adding the Huron Street location would open up a number of opportunities for attractions located in that area and provide easy access to some who may require transit services to move about the city.

Her colleague, Paul Christian reminded council that it is important to represent all citizens and the city has already invested millions of dollars into the transit system with more to come.

“The move to Huron Street makes more sense from an efficiency standpoint,” he said.

Mayor Christian Provenzano agreed.

“For years we have pushed staff to find efficiencies and reduce spending and reduce our footprint,” he said.

The issue has been before council more than half-a-dozen times and both locations should be considered part of the city’s downtown, he said.

Council’s focus has been to improve the transit system and its ridership.

“We need to treat all of downtown as important and that includes our canal district and we need to improve our facilities in that area,” he said. “It’s wrong to continue to spend money on Dennis Street in light of the information provided.”

Costs to renovate the Huron Street site and move the terminal there are estimated at \$2.16 million. The cost to build a new terminal on the existing site is estimated at \$2.33 million. Completing only renovations at the existing site with the existing space is \$972,720.

Eliminating the Dennis Street terminal will also result in an annual savings of \$105,000 annually. It will also meet a further \$67,000 in fuel savings and salary expenses annually.

Niro’s motion failed in a 4-7 vote. In favor of the Dennis Street option were Niro, Shoemaker, Scott and Bruni.

Similarly, the motion to move the terminal to Huron Street resulted in a 7-4 vote with Niro, Shoemaker, Scott and Bruni voting against that option.