

Theatre Aurora calls for ?support? from the Town in lease battle

By Brock Weir

Aurora has marked a new lease for Theatre Aurora as a ?high priority? item after several members of the venerable local institution sounded off on the ongoing ?battle? between themselves and the Town over their new lease agreement.

Theatre Aurora, which is based at the Factory Theatre on Henderson Drive, has been going through nearly two years of lease negotiations with the Town, resulting in a series of changes to the space the theatre community says are unacceptable.

The theatre's president, Sal Aguila, likened the negotiations to ?a war, a battle? appearing before Council in Open Forum last week.

?We have been as transparent, as cooperative and as open as we possibly can at every turn, yet every time we come in for negotiations the terms change,? he said. ?We don't know why, we don't know the reasoning behind it and unfortunately those terms are often unrealistic and don't make any sense. We are being asked to do things you wouldn't ask anybody. I don't get someone else to pay for my hydro; why are we being asked to pay for yours?

?We're not interested in getting into a fight with anybody. We have been there for 40 years and we have had a successful relationship with the Town of Aurora for over 40 years. We save the Town of Aurora \$500,000 every year just in labour costs alone. That is a lot of money. I don't know what other charitable organization in our Town does that. To suddenly toss this history, this tradition, this successful relationship that we have always had out the window because of some notion that we want more, or we have to do things better, without any real consideration of what the repercussions are going to be, seems just not right.?

But, he added, if the Town of Aurora wants to ?play the game? they are ready to step it up. After 40 years, however, their question is why.

?We provide life skills, we bring new people in to learn about self-reliance, learn about courage, the importance of working and collaborative effort,? he continued. ?They know about work ethic, about doing things they didn't think they could. These aren't just theatrical skills. These are things that will make you successful everywhere you go.

?If we don't have culture and we don't have art, we have nothing. We are another suburb. We have the chance with a proper lease and fair lease to do something that is going to last forever and last way past all of us and we have a choice. Either we do something that is going to be a blight on our history, or we do something that is going to be a highlight, a turning point in our road to the greatness that our town is destined to have.?

Little information was offered at last week's meeting on where things stand right now, but Mayor Geoff Dawe said Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny has marked this as a ?very high priority? item with meetings set up this week to continue the discussions.

Nevertheless, other members of Theatre Aurora stepped forward to provide words of support, including long-time actor, producer and director Jo-anne Spitzer and Board member Joey Ferguson. Mr. Ferguson, for instance, told Councillors he became involved with the theatre as a youth member, growing not only to become a Board member, but an active member with several directorial and design productions notched onto his belt.

?Theatre Aurora is an important part of my life. For me, it is more than just a theatre; we are a community, a family, a group of individuals across all ages who come together with one common goal: to entertain,? he said. ?My involvement with Theatre Aurora has done much for where I am today. It prompted me both to go into media production and most recently teaching, where I will be starting my career come September.

?At this time, Members of Town Staff that Theatre Aurora's Board of Directors have been negotiating the lease [with] have put us in an uncomfortable position. We feel that they have been pushing terms that are unfair and do not represent the long relationship that we have had with the Town, nor follow the Town of Aurora's Cultural mandate.

?I do ask as our representatives, both as citizens and as a charitable non-profit community cultural organization, that on our behalf you ask why this relationship has been threatened for reasons we don't know about and why at least, in my personal opinion and personal feelings, that culture in Aurora [feels] like it is under attack once again.?