This page was exported from - The Auroran
Export date: Thu Mar 28 12:01:57 2024 / +0000 GMT

New strategy for economic development draws criticism

By Brock Weir

This winter, Aurora will chart a new course on economic development, but the priorities set out in the new vision have drawn criticism from local business leaders.

Council is set to review the implantation of a new ?hybrid? economic development model which, along with the hiring of a new Economic Development Officer, will see the creation of an expanded Economic Development Board which will pave the way for greater autonomy and creativity in enticing local businesses to Aurora.

According to the plan, the creation of a new Economic Development Board will bring a new mandate along with it. The intent, according the plan, is to ?focus on the expansion of services in strategic areas that offer the greatest return to Council.?

These recommendations include the expansion of existing business retention programs, the relaunch of Aurora's Business Concierge Program, and expanded responsibilities when it comes to enhancing tourism and marketing.

?In late 2012, the Town of Aurora undertook over 150 business visits as part of the Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) program,? said Doug Nadorozny, Aurora's CAO, in his initial pitch to Council on the new mandate. ?The goal of this program was to identify opportunities and actions to assist local businesses. This program resulted in a number of successes in quickly and efficiently addressing both opportunities and challenges highlighted by local businesses.

?Statistically, a significant proportion of new job creation is generated through existing business growth and networks. Moreover, maintaining an active and healthy relationship with local business is at the core of economic development. Based on best practices and recent business BR&E efforts locally, it is recommended that the Town expand and formalize a business visitation program, building on the previous work done in BR&E?targeting 500 business visitations each year, meet with the 10 largest employers semi-annually, identify and address red flag issues raised in business visitation within 30 days of the visitation, and regularly update and implement an action plan that addresses longer-term issues raised by local business where appropriate.?

While the intent of the new shifts in economic development were greeted warmly by EDAC, it drew significant criticism from some members of the Committee, who did not see the merit of expanding a program they saw as falling far short of the success line.

?I have no problem with the direction, the interest, the passion, the philosophy, or the need; I'm there,? said EDAC member Marilee Harris. ?I have a lot of problems with the actual document a far as what you have decided this expanded function is going to do. I am really concerned that Councillors think that these are good actions for an Economic Development Expanded Resource to be taking. You talked about doing more interviews with business, and it was a great success. I don't know what success it was and I have been on this committee for six years.

?We only did one survey when [Councillor Michael Thompson was] Chair and we weren't even allowed to have input into the questions let alone hear the responses because it was a Regional initiative. To frame that as something that is successful that we should expand is way out of line ? and an abuse of taxpayers' dollars to redirect funds to do more of something that we did once in the six years I have been on this committee that didn't have any impact. To state that it did and we should expand it and to have Councillors agree to that I think is an embarrassment. I would be embarrassed if I was a Councillor.?

Ms. Harris also had strong words for the plan to fund a great deal of these new initiatives from apparently under-utilized funds set aside for Aurora's Community Improvement Program (CIP).

The CIP program was established to give business owners, primarily along Aurora's Yonge and Wellington Promenade and its offshoots, funds to improve their properties and make it attractive for incoming businesses, including dollars for façade improvements.

Few applications have come forward since the fund was established and staff recommended these dollars would be better used to spur economic development activity in other areas.

Ms. Harris, however, said this was a symptom of another problem.

?Council approved spending money to get consultants in to do a great deal of good work on the value of a community improvement plan,? she said. ?It is a great idea. We all agreed it would be a great idea. We endorsed as a committee that Council approves putting some money in the budget. It is not being used, it is not being used because it has not been marketed.

The recommendations, she concluded, were ?misleading and inappropriate? and moved dollars round with ?questionable logic.? Time and effort, she contended would be better spent with a focus on selling Aurora, a recommendation which struck a chord with Councillors attending last month's EDAC meeting. Staff members, including Mr. Nadorozny, also agreed that sales need to be a focus.

That sales focus, he said, should also be in ?making sure we're front and centre at York Region? making sure they're talking about Aurora in their planning and marketing.

?This is a concern of the whole N6 CAOs group in terms of the Region's role for economic development and how to get the smaller communities that comprise York Region [to get business leads],? said Mr. Nadorozny, referring to York Region's six most northern municipalities compared to the ?big three? of Markham, Richmond Hill, and Vaughan.

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: ?I agree that we need to be more sales oriented when it comes to economic development and I do agree that it has to be at the Regional level, so I agree that we have to have a strong representation at the Region selling Aurora.?

Councillor Tom Mrakas added that Council should take the Committee's concerns and criticisms to heart.

?Committee members would like to have some input,? he said, asking for assurance there would be further opportunity for them to weigh in on the new mandate. ??We have always relied on them. Council has only approved the concept in principle.?