

?Bong shop? raises questions over plaza renovations

By Brock Weir

An application to spruce up a south Aurora plaza through the Town's Community Improvement Plan might go up in a puff of smoke after one Councillor raised his eyebrows over the presence of a ?bong shop.?

The Aurora Heritage Plaza, on the southwest corner of Yonge Street and Brookland Avenue, is set to undergo a renovation project of over \$230,000, \$15,000 of which they hope will come from Aurora's Community Improvement Plan (CIP).

The CIP was established in 2014 to provide financial incentives to local businesses to improve their properties and stimulate redevelopment through a number of areas including improvement of signage and facades and the intensification of retail and commercial uses in the downtown core.

Should the application by plaza owners be approved at Council this week, a municipal infusion into the overall cost of the project will pave the way for the removal and replacement of a new canopy, replacing all shop front windows and doors and re-stuccoing the existing façade and other exterior elements.

?The proposed work seeks to enhance the commercial use of the property by enhancing the existing façade and contributing to an enhanced streetscape,? said Nick Kazakoff, Aurora's new Economic Development Officer. ?The proposed work would also meet the Aurora Promenade's objective of promoting investment in the private building stock of the Promenade as a complement to public investment in streetscape and other public realm, recreation and municipal facilities. The CIP encourages the improvements of such properties through building enhancements to promote occupancy, bringing sites into highest and best active use.?

Occupancy, however, was at issue for Councillor Paul Pirri who questioned whether they were going to ?get rid of the bong shop that is operating out of there? in the process, referring to The Laughing Buddha pipe store.

?It is within Council's right to ask that and we could make that a condition of the grant,? said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning.

Occupancy was also an issue on the mind of Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who approached it from a different angle.

?It is a pretty unattractive strip mall at the moment, and they are going to make it a lot better,? she said. ?But, I assume because it is pretty unattractive, the businesses there are getting a pretty low rent, [and] it is nice to have a diversity in the Town.?

Considering residential units are on the upper floor of the plaza, she questioned whether Aurora has any control of the rents, predicting the cost to live in one of these units might shoot up once the renovations are complete. Mr. Ramunno, however, said Aurora does not have a mechanism in place to control rents.

?I am in favour of improving the look of the strip mall, but I think it is probably going to increase the rents of the tenants,?

Councillor Gaertner continued. ?If there is a bong shop there, which I wasn't aware, they are probably going to have to find another location. They are probably not going to be able to afford it.?

From Councillor Michael Thompson's perspective, \$15,000 coming from the CIP towards a \$230,00 renovation is relatively little and he questioned the use of money set aside for the CIP supporting renovations that are going to happen regardless.

?I understand the intent of the program is to help business owners do this, but if somebody is already going to do a complete refresh of the building, we're almost giving them \$15,000 they would have otherwise spent,? said Councillor Thompson. ?If it is just us giving a business owner a \$15,000 grant to defer some of his costs, then I don't think that is the intent of the program.?

Councillor Sandra Humfries, however, disagreed, adding: ?I am happy they are taking advantage of our Community Improvement grant, but I don't want to make any strings attached. I want this to move forward. It might happen anyway, but I think it is going to be a huge improvement.?