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Council has made progress Mayor wants to see through



By Brock Weir

Nearly 20 years ago, Geoff Dawe stood at the Council podium.
As co-chair of the fundraising committee for Aurora's new library, which has since become the Town's most popular community hub, he thinks back to his pitch to the Council of the day and wonders, in hindsight, why it took 17 years to tear down the old Library and Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street and get something going for downtown revitalization.
Although it took nearly two decades to get there, the buildings were torn down last month and now Mayor Dawe wants to see this redevelopment through to completion.
Ahead of his speech to local business and community leaders at the Aurora Chamber of Commerce this week, Mayor Dawe sat down for his annual pre-address interview with The Auroran talking about the year ahead and, for him, the year ahead will include a re-election campaign.
?Absolutely, and I'm looking forward to it,? said Mayor Dawe on whether he would indeed seek a third term. ?I remember standing up as vice chair of the fundraising committee to say, ?We need to get rid of those two buildings and move forward with something in this area.' We have now made that decision and I would love to see it to conclusion. I think there are some fabulous opportunities in that area for what the new buildings we're looking at can provide.
?[There is also] the Armoury coming to fruition and doing something with that. When [the Town] bought it, we all had a vision and we all had an idea and to see that through as well. [Being Mayor] is, without a doubt, the most fascinating thing I have ever done and will go from someone wanting to know why their green bin wasn't fully emptied to right now working with Community Living helping them fundraise for their new facility that will help them service this area.?
There is never a dull moment in the job, he says, but he also says he is looking forward to tackling some of the less ?sexy? but no less important issues that will face Aurora and the Region of York not too far down the road.
?There is a huge amount of angst in terms of infill,? he says, on an issue which has been the subject of a great deal of community discussion in 2018 thus far. ?One of my concerns when we look at things like that is we put rules and policies in place in a [piecemeal] basis and people would say it is good politics, but it is bad policy. I think we need to be looking at how to do an official plan and start doing an official plan. We can't do it officially, but I think we need to start it unofficially in conjunction to what the Region is doing with their Municipal Comprehensive Review. I think it is a great opportunity to look at how we [do this] holistically. We have to stop doing things piecemeal because it is not a good, long-term decision. We have to be more disciplined moving forward.?
Looking back on the year that was, Mayor Dawe cites the progress on Library Square as an important achievement. Although he says he would have ?much preferred unanimity? in the decision that Council ultimately took, he is heartened that the majority ?saw

fit to move forward? with what he says will be ?a fabulous focal area.?
?We have talked forever about revitalizing downtown, but you don't want to do anything,? he says of some inaction around the table. ?A lot of people would say after all is said and done a lot was said but not much was done. I think we have moved past that. Certainly one of the things that is frustrating through this whole process is the amount of misinformation or the number of times people will grab misinformation and leverage on that.?
One misconception he sites is an argument that the Library Square area will have less parking than it does now, a statement he contends is untrue.
?There was a good exchange,? he says of the progress, ?Perhaps not the most pleasant of exchanges at times, but it was a good exchange of ideas and moving forward.?
One of the primary benefits of bringing Library Square to fruition is the benefits it will bring to businesses in the area, he says. A number of decisions have been made over the last few years that will bring people into Aurora's Downtown Core, he says, including the redevelopment of Aurora United Church, the redevelopment of Wells Street School into a loft complex, and higher density housing near the northern of Yonge and Wellington.
?It is always a Catch-22 ? you want people there, but you have to bring people in before people want to be there,? he says. ?This is part of that process to recreate that area.?
An integral part of this, he says, will be the transformation of the historic Aurora Armoury into an off-shoot of Niagara College's Canadian Institute of Food and Wine. This repurposing, which will see the Armoury completely renovated for both the College's and community's uses, is something Mayor Dawe says has generated even more chatter than Library Square.
?The Canadian Food & Wine Institute (CFWI) is a good example of a post-secondary institution thinking outside the box,? he says. ?We talked to a number of different educational institutions about expanding and it didn't work out for them within the guidelines that were put in by the Provincial government. The CFWI looked at this as an opportunity to do that expansion, keep within the rules, but think outside the box at the same time. Will others follow? We've thought maybe there would be potential for a private school. There is lots of foreign interest in the Canadian educational system and the energy that is put into it.?
In the last term of Council, investors were looking to bring another private school to the site of the George Browning House on Yonge Street, just north of Reuben. While this ultimately fell through, Mayor Dawe says this site is once again up for redevelopment and, if approved, will bring new residences ? and, most importantly, residents ? to the Downtown Core.
There will be further places for people to rest their heads on the east side of Town as well.
Work is already underway constructing the new Microtel hotel on Eric T. Smith Way in the heart of Aurora's business park. In addition to the second hotel development announced last year on nearby Don Hillock Drive, and Frank Stronach's plan for a hotel and conference centre on the southeast corner of Bayview and Wellington, Mayor Dawe says there is an application for another hotel on Eric T. Smith way working its way through the planning process.
?We went from zero to sixty,? says Mayor Dawe on Aurora going from no hotels to a deluge after the Region of York reduced development charges on hotel developments. ?This has kick-started hotel activity in both Aurora and Richmond Hill.?
This will be a boon to sports tourism, he says, citing the recent McPherson hockey tournament at St. Andrew's College which saw teams coming in from as far away as Germany. In these cases, until Microtel opens their doors, there is no place for these teams to stay within Town and, consequently, spend money in Aurora.
?There are a number of small steps we will continually take,? he says. ?We have added over 5,000 full time jobs in Aurora and that is substantial. We're changing the mix of jobs. Although seasonal part-time and full time employment has increased, there has actually been a shift in the total mix from part-time to full-time jobs, which is great news for the Town. There is the ability to live more closely to where you work and it helps re-energize the sense of community we have.?