

Business Improvement Area set for re-launch next week

By Brock Weir

It has been years in the making, now a Business Improvement Area in Aurora's core is poised to launch next week, designed to give downtown business and property owners opportunities to 'revise and beautify' the downtown core while promoting it as a destination.

Council is expected to sign off on a bylaw on September 18 setting the Business Improvement Area (BIA) in motion, following this week's General Committee meeting.

'The intent of the Aurora BIA is to revitalize and beautify the downtown core and promote the area as a destination for residents to work, shop and play,' said Nick Kazakoff, Economic Development Officer for the Town of Aurora, in a report before Council this week. 'The object of the BIA will be to oversee the improvement, beautification and maintenance of municipally-owned land, buildings and structures in the area when beyond Town standards. The BIA will also provide opportunities for area businesses to thrive through promotion and advertising.'

Local business owners have long expressed concerns with the state of Aurora's downtown core, and decided to do something about it this past April, taking their case to Council.

Speaking on behalf of the group, Joanne Russo, whose Russo Corp. operates out of a heritage house on Wellington Street East, said the BIA would be volunteer-run and dedicated to 'improving and promoting' the historic core 'through investment and advocacy to build and maintain its position as Aurora's premiere shopping, business and entertainment destination.'

'We want to bring our historic Downtown back to what it used to be: the jewel of Aurora,' said Ms. Russo at the time. 'In conjunction with the Town, we have surveyed 91 businesses and the results were overwhelmingly in favour of a BIA. We hope to join together with the Town to organize and carry out physical improvements and promote economic development in the historical district. Our plan is to enhance our business area to create an inviting atmosphere for local businesses and neighbouring residential areas and mostly to encourage pedestrian traffic in the Downtown Core. The time is right for a BIA as the Town's Library Square project begins to take shape and the renewed emphasis on expanded neighbourhoods comes to fruition.'

'We do this for several reasons: we want to revitalize and beautify [Aurora's] historical centre and make it a destination for local residents to work, shop and play. We want to provide opportunities for area businesses to thrive through community events and focused advertising. Our three-year plan will revitalize and beautify the Aurora Downtown Core and this will happen through the placement of benches, historic signage, lampposts, banners, murals, etc. Most importantly, we will create an entertainment hub anchored by several pedestrian-focused events that will spotlight our local businesses.'

The BIA district proposed to Council this week extends from Wellington Street East at Berczy Street to Yonge Street at Mosley Streets. According to the report, notices were sent to all property owners and businesses in the area giving them a chance to object to the proposed BIA. Written objections were received, it says, but the total number of objections was 'well below the required one-third threshold to prevent' Council from passing the bylaw establishing the BIA.

'Objections amounted to approximately six per cent of the properties,' said Mr. Kazakoff. 'The objections were also significantly below the requirement of representing at least one-third of the taxes levied on the subject properties in the BIA area.'

Once established, the BIA, as proposed, will consist of nine directors, with one of the nine appointed by Council and the balance selected by a vote of BIA members. These members will then need to be appointed by Council. The report recommends the Town Clerk be appointed as Council's representative on the Board of Management to coordinate the creation of the Board and the Corporation.

'Over the next two to three months, the Board of Management will have to convene a meeting of the members to hold a vote to elect the Directors not appointed by Council, which will then have to be appointed by Council,' said Mr. Kazakoff. 'Once the Board of Management has filled its Director positions, the Directors will be responsible to develop an annual business plan and budget which will be presented to Council and recommended in the appropriate way.'

'The BIA Board of Management is required to prepare a proposed annual budget, reflecting the priorities and the needs of the BIA as determined by the Board and its membership. The Board is required to hold one or more meetings of its members for discussion of the proposed annual budget. Budgets are then submitted to Council for approval. The budget is usually financed by the BIA levies that are collected by the municipality and provided to the Board. The designation of the BIA and establishment of the Board of Management will have no financial implication for the Town as the operating budget for the BIA will be derived from levying BIA members.'