

Lieutenant-Governor underscores heritage, revitalization on Aurora trip



By Brock Weir

If you're looking for ways to revitalize Aurora's downtown core, the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario has a simple, four step recipe: ?a great coffee shop, a bookstore, a good bakery, and an art gallery.?

This was the verdict of Lieutenant-Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell last Tuesday after her whirlwind afternoon in Aurora, which ended with a reception following a roundtable discussion centred on Aurora's heritage.

The Queen's representative in Ontario began her latest visit to Aurora with a stop at the Church Street School, where she received a sneak preview of brand-new installations offered by the Aurora Cultural Centre and the Aurora Museum and Archives, followed by an auto tour of local landmarks and ongoing revitalization projects hosted by Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Following the tour, the Lieutenant-Governor was welcomed at Town Hall where she facilitated a roundtable discussion of various community groups, discussing growth with an eye to heritage preservation.

?This is why I come out to visit communities because I learn about the people where they are,? Her Honour told The Auroran following the meeting. ?I have the privilege of having a convening power that allows people to come together to have conversations and sometimes they are conversations about the longer term. This was an opportunity where His Worship and Council put in questions about what happened in the past and what we want to take forward from those lessons for the future. One of the things I get to do is tell stories and I was able to share some stories from other municipalities where I have been that are facing some of the same issues ? and it is really about sharing stories.?

Ms. Dowdeswell said it was ?quite wonderful? to see Aurora's heritage resources, like those in the Town's ?Cultural Precinct? up

close. She said she was particularly interested in new developments in the area, such as the Wells Street School House Lofts and the ongoing renovations at the historic Aurora Armoury, that respect history while keeping an eye on the future.

"I really admire Councils, for example, that really do this kind of development planning with heritage in mind, but in such a thoughtful way that strikes that balance," she said. "That is so evident in what I saw. Of course, the new projects, the new developments are going to be so interesting. I didn't get to see inside the old Armoury, but I saw pictures of it and it is going to be a great new facility as well."

Following the roundtable discussion, the Lieutenant-Governor met a further cross-section of community representatives at a reception hosted in Town Hall's Skylight Gallery.

Here, Mayor Mrakas said he was pleased to share pieces of Aurora's "long and storied history" with the Lieutenant-Governor.

"We consider our heritage in our Town to be a crucial component and one of our greatest assets," he said. "We continually seek to ensure our community does not come, when it comes to growth, at a sacrifice to our heritage. This was the topic of today's roundtable: how we can celebrate heritage while we continue to grow. Ask yourself: what is it that connects all of us? I think, at the end of the day, what does connect all of us in the Town of Aurora is our heritage."

"We spoke around it at the roundtable, I spoke about it with Her Honour when we were in the vehicle. A lot of times anyone who comes to the Town of Aurora, whether you come here to live here or whether you come here to work here, and you start to learn about our history and our heritage, you start to feel connected to the Town and the people in this Town and that is what I think is unique about [Aurora]. As we grow as a Town and as we develop, as long as we celebrate, promote and keep that heritage aspect of this Town, we will always be Aurora and we will always be what makes Aurora special."

The Lieutenant-Governor, in turn, echoed these remarks.

"Perhaps you won't be surprised, but the Mayor forewarned me in our one on one meeting, he had used phrases like 'this is the centre of the universe' and just what a wonderful, sweet spot this Town was in the middle of mass chaos and confusion, those are my words and not his," she said. "But it was so interesting to see around the roundtable as we were talking that that was generally a view shared by everyone, that people love being here."

"I was telling those people at the roundtable that what would draw me out here on a Saturday morning was if you had four things: a great coffee shop, a bookstore, a good bakery, and an art gallery. That would be worth the 40-minute drive out, I think. We're going to see what we can do about that "three out of four isn't bad!"