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Downtown Aurora to get ?canopy? of lights

By Brock Weir

A new ambience will become the hallmark of Aurora's historic downtown core when a ?canopy of lights? is installed over Yonge Street from Wellington Street in the north to Mosley Street in the south.

Council last week approved the latest downtown revitalization project last week, setting an upset limit of $100,000 to make it a reality, money which will come from reserves set aside for the Aurora Promenade.

The Canopy of Lights initiative was proposed to Council by Mayor Tom Mrakas, who said it would not only be a downtown landmark, but a way to tell Aurora's story by ?promoting Aurora's built heritage.?

Speaking to his motion, Mayor Mrakas cited the Aurora Promenade Plan which is designed to encourage people to explore the Yonge and Wellington corridors on foot and see it as a gateway ?where a narrative unfolds with every passing block, telling a story about Aurora's past, present and future.?

?This is part of that,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?I think there are many things to come forward within the revitalization of our downtown through the redevelopment of Library Square. I think with the redevelopment of the Armoury, Niagara College coming in, there are many things that are exciting and moving forward within our downtown core area that is going to help with revitalization and I believe this is something that will help encourage and create a focal point, something that will attract people from not just within our community, but also from outside our community, to come into our downtown core and experience it.

?Sometimes you need something unique and this is something that will bring that uniqueness to the area.?

This enthusiasm was shared at the podium by Joanne Russo of the Downtown Aurora BIA, who delegated to Council in favour of the motion.

?The Canopy of Lights will serve as a physical and noteworthy identification of the historical downtown BIA area and the businesses that are located there,? said Ms. Russo. ?This will draw the attention of residents and consumers who come to the area to enjoy the many restaurants and shops and will help promote the downtown core.?

Quick to voice their support for the project were Councillors Rachel Gilliland and Sandra Humfryes.

Councillor Gilliland said that although she had further

questions about the operational costs of the Canopy, she had heard from ?a lot? of local residents who have envisioned something similar and that it would ?attract a lot of people to come in? to the core with a ?warm, exciting and inviting? atmosphere.

?This is exciting to me because I have been trying to get us to spend some money down in the core,? added Councillor Humfryes. ?This is just going to add to the streetscape that we already owe to it to our downtown.?

But the devil was in the details.

Mayor Mrakas initially proposed November 23 as the date to get the Canopy over Yonge Street to coincide with this year's Santa Under the Stars Parade. Staff offered some concerns that this date would not be feasible if they went through their normal procurement process, so the Mayor and Councillor Humfryes moved to waive the Town's procurement bylaw and sole source the project.

This move did not sit well with Councillor John Gallo who said it was important to stick with the processes already in place.

?I would like to know what the rush is if we would be going down that road,? said Councillor Gallo. ?Let's do it right. I just don't see the value of speed-tracking this.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner was on the same wavelength, stating that ?process is very important.?

?I understand the Mayor's excitement and Council's excitement to have this ready for the parade, but it seems to me the higher good here is to make sure it is done right, that all the research is done right, that staff is satisfied,? she said. ?I can't agree with the amendment. I am not really sure we should be rushing this; I really want it to be fantastic and it is not a lot of time to ensure that we're doing it right.?

?Hesitation? was also expressed by Councillor Michael Thompson who said while he thought the Canopy was ?a great idea? and he supported the concept, he was concerned that the date was ?driving? the process.

?I would hate to see shortcuts taken on the design and installation,? said Councillor Thompson. ?This is something that is going to be permanent and hopefully stand the test of time. We want it to be spectacular, we want to get it right. Sixty days to figure out the whole design, figure out the installation and get it done. That's what's driving anything.?

While the motion to proceed with the Canopy failed, the amendment to sole source the project was ultimately voted down by Council and it will proceed through the normal channels ? without a firm deadline of when

it needs to be in place.

?I am not opposed to changing the date, I just wanted to light a fire under staff to see if we could get it done by then,? concluded Mayor Mrakas. ?If it can't be done, then that's fine. As we all know, within government circles, things tend to take a very, very long time, so sometimes you have to light that fire to get people moving a bit and sometimes I like to push the buttons and get people moving a little quicker because that's how you get things done sometimes.?