

Streetscape improvements for Aurora Promenade receive green light

Removable features focus of plan as 'main street' area could be redeveloped

By Brock Weir

With the bulk of the heritage properties in Aurora's historic downtown core being owned by less than a handful of individuals, the Town of Aurora is leaving the door open to possible redevelopment as it looks at options to beautify the Aurora Promenade.

The Aurora Promenade is a vision for the Town's 'main street' area and comprises of large swaths of Yonge and Wellington Streets, from Irwin Avenue in the north, to Church Street in the South, and bordered on the east and west by Wellington's intersections with Mill Street and Larmont Avenue.

Streetscape improvements for the area have been envisioned for more than five years and have seen a number of various proposals hit the Council table, but the latest vision, which is expected to be ratified this week, will have some teeth behind it.

Sitting at the Committee level last Tuesday, local lawmakers gave the green light to the Aurora Promenade Streetscape Design & Implementation plan in the amount of \$570,000.

While previous proposals have included more permanent additions such as patterned concrete pavers to replace existing sidewalks, the latest concept centres on 'removable' elements like benches and planters in the event of redevelopment or infill in the area.

'Although the buildout of the Aurora Promenade is anticipated to occur over a long-term horizon, there is potential in the main streets area' based on the recent consolidation of properties on Yonge Street,' said Anthony Ierullo, Manager of Policy Planning and Economic Development for the Town of Aurora, in his report to Council. 'As a result, staff are recommending that the proposed improvements initially focus on the removable streetscape components that can be relocated in the event that construction occurs. These components include container landscaping, new street furniture, and promotional banners that will improve the streetscape without investing significantly in permanent hard infrastructure.'

Should the plan be formally approved by Council this week, staff will be further refining the plan to ensure snow removal is not impacted during the winter months, that on-street parking remains accessible, and further opportunities to enhance plantings and street furniture, all in consultation with the Downtown Aurora BIA.

With a proposed price tag of \$415,000, the budget

includes \$50,000 for year-round hanging baskets on all pedestrian light poles, allowing for year-round landscaping, \$95,000 for the installation of ?long, narrow planters? for year-round landscaping, \$145,000 for ?heritage-style? furniture, \$75,000 for promotional banners in the area, and \$50,000 for seasonal winter decorations for street lights.

Removed from the project is an \$80,000 allocation for street trees, a matter which raised some eyebrows around the Committee table last week.

?I have looked at a lot of main streets recently and, to me, one of the most inviting things about the main streets I liked was the trees,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?Street furniture and all that is really nice, but I think we need trees for the ambiance and, frankly, for the shade.?

This was a concern shared by Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said she has seen examples in other Canadian cities, including Halifax, that have been able to accommodate trees in revitalization projects.

But, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Operations, said trees are ?somewhat problematic? in the Aurora Promenade area at it is recommended trees be placed in a ?well system? to accommodate drainage, in a similar vein to plantings in and around stops in the Viva Rapidways in Newmarket and elsewhere in York Region.

?That would mean we would actually have to tear up the entire sidewalk in order to plant the trees which, at the same time, we would then want to look at relocating some of the utilities that are within,? he said. ?One leads to another and certainly part of the discussion when we were looking at this report, we felt this was going to be fairly intrusive into the existing infrastructure within the Downtown Core, in order to introduce those trees.

?I am happy to provide Council with the information within the Promenade about what we have to do in order to introduce trees. This (\$80,000 item) is just the cost of the trees, but you have to put the trees in something, so now we have to dig up the sidewalk, we have to actually build the tree wells, we need to put in irrigation, we need to put in drainage. Those needs to be connected into our services, so now we need to tear up Yonge Street in order to do that. We need to come back and refinish that again. Those costs are not included in that. This is just the cost of trees. I would be happy to give Council perhaps a cross-section of some of the work that is required within the promenade in order to support trees within the sidewalk area and then a decision can be made from there.?

Council members were nevertheless interested in seeing a further report come back outlining what would be entailed to make street trees a reality.

?I recall when we did the Promenade Study [the

consultant] was heavily involved in the redesign of Bloor Street and I think we can probably learn a lot from him and what they did there,? said Councillor John Gallo. ?I think it gives a dynamic to our downtown that you cannot duplicate with anything