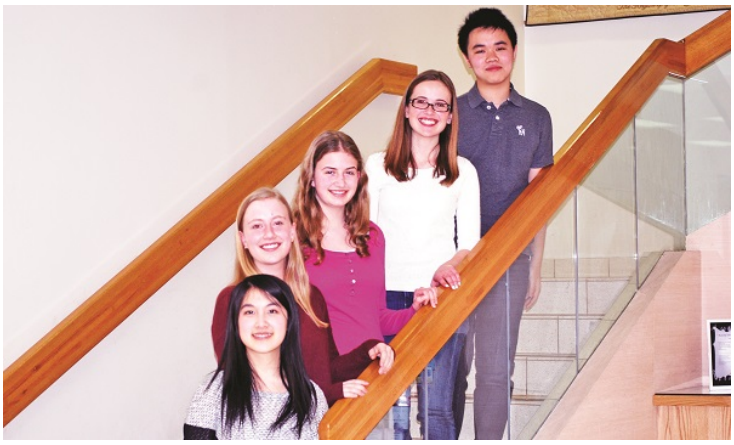
Aurora students want say in the decisions impacting them



By Brock Weir

Aurora's youth want a voice in local matters that will have a direct impact on them.

That is the word from a group of students from schools across Aurora ? and beyond ? who came forward last week to make a pitch for a municipal Youth Advisory Committee.

Bringing together Breanna Charleson of Cardinal Carter CHS, Kelly Gary of St. Maximilian Kolbe CHS, Sabrina Lin and Hannah Thiessen, both of Aurora High School, and Aaron Zhang, an Aurora resident who attends school at Newmarket's Sacred Heart, the group says a committee like this in Aurora would build on the success of others in Richmond Hill and Markham.

?As a committee, our goal is to create a platform to provide for the youth of Aurora a voice at the Town level,? said Lin. ?We want to be able to identify and bring forward issues that affect the youth of Aurora and act as an advisory group to Council and advise on issues related to youth. We would also like to promote and get youth involved in Town events as we think it is very important to bridge the gap between the adult community and the youth in Aurora.?

Added Gary: ?We feel there will be many benefits to having this committee. Youth will be provided with leadership opportunities and feel connected with the community. In addition, they will be able to inform the Town of important issues involving youth.?

Speaking to The Auroran after the group made their pitch to Council, Zhang said their idea for a youth committee not only sprang from watching and getting feedback from the groups in Markham and, in particular, Richmond Hill, but also as a natural extension of what they do in their respective school communities.

?We are all involved individuals in our schools and the next logical step from there was being involved in the Town as a whole because there are a lot of opportunities in our schools to voice our opinions,? he said. ?In my opinion, and I am sure in their opinion too, there are not as many currently in the Town. It is about bringing those opportunities to voice their opinion and increase youth engagement in the Town.?

When asked if he thought youth in Aurora were engaged overall, Zhang said that is an answer contingent on who one talked to.

?I think the average youth doesn't know a lot of the opportunities out there and they are not really engaged, but then there are a few that are really engaged and a lot that are not,? he said. ?I think it is definitely important we would engage everyone in our community.

?I think Parks and Recreation is probably the most important [area] for youth and that would be one of the biggest parts we would be involved with. I hope we would be able to plan events that would add to events already here and promote what the Town has now. There are so many opportunities that the Town has which youth don't really know about. The first thing is the Mayor's Cleanup. There could definitely be a higher turnout if there were students in each school who could promote it, for example.?

After the students made their pitch to Council, it was then up to the elected members to decide what to do next ? and they ultimately decided to explore the idea further. Voting against taking the next steps in looking at establishing a youth committee was Councillor Paul Pirri.

Although Councillor Pirri was elected when to Council when he was just 22, he said he has ?always been opposed to the concept? of a youth concept in the same way he would oppose ?a strictly seniors committee or a committee for women.?

?I feel it marginalizes individuals and ultimately if the individuals in the community have opinions they should be brought forward as individuals rather than just youth,? he said. ?Youth can contribute just as well as other individuals around the table as well.?

Although he voted in favour of looking further into a Youth Committee, Councillor Michael Thompson said there was nothing currently stopping youth to join the debate through applying to one of Aurora's advisory committees, delegating to Council, or to any of the committees.

On the other hand, Councillor John Gallo, who served as a member of Hazel McCallion's Youth Advisory Committee in his younger days in Mississauga, said he was ?somewhat shocked? by the comments.

?There are so many benefits to this type of thing in planting the seeds for politics,? he said. ?I see nothing but good things coming out of this.?
Before the students came to Council to pitch their concept, they ran their ideas by Councillors John Abel and Chris Ballard, who were enthusiastic in their support of the plan last week.

?I certainly want to capture the enthusiasm of these young people,? said Councillor Ballard. ?Here we are, six months from our next municipal election. We are always complaining that there is such a lack of participation, especially amongst youth. Here is an opportunity to have a pipeline into each of our secondary schools in our community. I can't see how we wouldn't jump at this, quite frankly. This has just fallen out of the sky into our laps. How can we not say yes??