

Attainable housing will be key to Aurora's future: Mayor



The global pandemic has spurred a seismic shift in the world and as much as these shifts have caused challenges, they have also spurred opportunity.

This was a message delivered to the local business community by Mayor Tom Mrakas on Wednesday afternoon, March 23, at his annual address to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

The annual speech is delivered through a 'State of the Town' lens and while the Mayor said the state of the Town is 'strong' coming out of the pandemic, there are opportunities Aurora needs to take advantage of if the community wants to stay ahead of the game.

'As a Town, we're evolving and changing for the better,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'We're preparing for the jobs of tomorrow and not for the jobs of today. With a rapidly shifting economy in the global pandemic the nature of workplace is one that is also changing.'

Support for business now and with an eye to the future is 'paramount' he said, and this includes adapting and adjusting to whatever the pandemic continues to have in store.

Last Wednesday's address was the first large gathering in Aurora since mask mandates were lifted Ontario-wide just two days previously.

Whether it is illness, war, or natural disaster, the Mayor said 'the world is changing and Aurora is in a unique place to change with it.'

'We have an opportunity to take advantage of the world's shift,' he continued. 'Our Town has an opportunity to welcome talent [beyond geographical boundaries], support the workforce through training and connections and encourage local economic growth. By supporting our business in helping them through the tough times, we help them to be around to support the oncoming demand for talent.'

'Working from home requires attainable housing for all levels of our talented workforce. If we want to attract and keep workers in Aurora, we need to be able to offer a lifestyle that either meets or exceeds their needs. This includes a diverse and welcoming community, excellent facilities and amenities, with a wide variety of programs and services and local business support for large and

small businesses. This also means attainable housing: housing that a person can find that meets their needs and is financially within their means, by a variety of housing for a variety of people to contribute to the growing fabric of Aurora.?

Attainable Housing, he said, 'needs a plan and support' and this is reflected in the Town's Official Plan, which is currently undergoing a re-draft.

The upcoming revised Official Plan will be the result of hard work to 'balance Aurora's need to grow while protecting our rich natural and built heritage assets,' said Mayor Mrakas.

Municipalities spend 'a great deal of time and effort' and hundreds of thousands of tax dollars' to meet growth targets to ensure communities like Aurora 'grow responsibly, provide a diverse housing stock, intensifying in the right areas, all while respecting the uniqueness of the community.'

'Despite this, we have seen situations where applicants look to build outside the confines of that plan, bypass community consultation and Council' and it is disappointing and frustrating when planning applicants immediately appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal (OLT) without even taking the opportunity to work with residents and Council to achieve a proposal that works with the community and for the applicant,' he continued, returning to his calls in recent weeks for the Province to dissolve the OLT.

'Earlier this year, the Province published a report from the Housing Affordability Task Force, which included 55 recommendations for official measures to increase the supply of affordable housing to address the housing crisis. I joined countless other Ontario mayors, along with the Small Urban Mayors (Task Force) in supporting the goals and principles outlined in the report, such as increasing the missing middle housing, more rental housing, and transit-oriented development with intensification. But we believe that there are more balanced and moderate ways of achieving the outcomes than many of the methods suggested.

'As we go through this year, the response to the pandemic has made it abundantly clear that what works for large urban centres may not necessarily work for our communities. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach and there are many other factors contributing to housing affordability beyond simply a municipal role and the time for approvals in the supply' We need changes to the legislation and more funding to bring more affordable housing to market.

'Affordable housing is key to unlocking the potential of our Town, our people, and our businesses.'

In speaking to the local business community, Mayor Mrakas highlighted work both the Town and the Chamber have accomplished in supporting businesses of all sizes during the global pandemic.

'I know 2021 was yet another challenging year and as the COVID-19 pandemic continued, restrictions came and went with each additional wave. Each time we thought we would emerge from this pandemic we were hammered with another wave and our social connections with loved ones ended. Of course, each wave brought restrictions, closures, and stress to our business community. Business owners have never faced this much uncertainty in generations. Those challenges go beyond just the impact to the bottom line: employee health concerns and absences, health and safety of staff and customers, enforcing regulations and more. The weight of these problems on business owners who also have to manage their own wellbeing and work-life balance was overwhelming. Some had no choice but to close their doors. Each, however, feel the impact of the pandemic for years to come.

'As a municipality and a community, we will continue to find ways to support our businesses as they navigate a post-pandemic future and foster the economic recovery. What gives me confidence is throughout the pandemic the Town of Aurora came together to keep the community engaged and connected while supporting the local economy. Business owners were steadfast, creative and innovative and, I have to be honest, I wasn't surprised. Aurora was built by innovators and entrepreneurs and we continue to see that spirit today. Because of this, we're extremely well positioned to not just recover but thrive.'

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter