

BIA clears first Council hurdle

By Brock Weir

A new Business Improvement Area, dedicated to preserving and attracting people back to Aurora's historic downtown core cleared one of its last Council hurdles last week.

Sitting at the Committee level last Tuesday, Council members gave a tentative thumbs-up to establishing a Business Improvement Area (BIA), which would extend from Wellington Street East at the GO Tracks, heading west to Yonge Street, and extending south on Yonge Street from there to Mosley Streets.

It has been a long-time coming, this latest iteration being spearheaded by a group of downtown business persons, headed up by Joanne Russo.

Council is set to pass the bylaw establishing the BIA this week and, following its passage, it is full steam ahead.

As The Auroran reported last Thursday, the intent of the Aurora BIA is to "revitalize and beautify the downtown core and promote the area as a destination for residents to work, shop and play," according to Nick Kazakoff, Economic Development Officer for the Town of Aurora. "The object of the BIA will be to oversee the improvement, beautification and maintenance of municipally-owned land, buildings and structures in the area when beyond Town standards. The BIA will also provide opportunities for area businesses to thrive through promotion and advertising."

Ms. Russo made her initial pitch for the BIA at Council this past April and, since then, the wheels have been in motion. According to Mr. Kazakoff, notices were sent to all area property and business owners in the BIA's proposed catchment area, giving them a chance to object to the plan. Written objections were indeed received, according to Council reports, but these objections came from only six per cent of property owners.

Once established, the BIA Board of Management, as proposed, will consist of nine directors, with one of the nine appointed by Council and the balance selected by a vote of BIA members. These members will then need to be appointed by Council. The report recommends the Town Clerk be appointed as Council's representative on the Board of Management to coordinate the creation of the Board and the Corporation.

Initiatives taken on by the BIA will be financed by levies collected by the BIA management from BIA members and there will be no direct financial implication for the Town as a whole.

The BIA will also be required to prepare an annual budget, reflecting the priority and needs of the BIA, as determined by its Board and Membership. Budgets will then be submitted to Council for discussion and approval.

At the first sweep over the recommendations last week, Council members heard from long-time downtown property owner Telly Spasopoulos, who has been involved in previous attempts at establishing a long-lasting BIA over the past two decades. He asked for a commitment of support from this Council towards the objectives and projects the BIA might bring forward.

"The lamp posts are still there [from the last] BIA, the flower pots and everything else is still there from the BIA, the Town Parking lot behind Aw, Shucks was paved by the BIA, and the Town at that time and Council did not give us the time of day," he said. "I would like to know how far the Town of Aurora and this and future Councils are willing to go ahead and support the BIA so the rest of us can join in and do something with it."

This question, however, remained unanswered as lawmakers tackled instead the fine details in the recommendation, as well as the length of time it has taken to get to this point. Mayor Geoff Dawe, for instance, asked Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, to elaborate on the steps carried out in this process so far.

"This has been going on for a number of years with respect to trying to establish some of the property owners and businesses as long as I have been here, for about 10 years, establish the BIA," said Mr. Ramunno. "It did get some traction a number of years ago and never really proceeded. I think this time around there was a lot of effort on behalf of the business owners who were interested, as well as staff, and it has really been driven by the business owners within that proposed BIA area. It has been going on for at least two or three years and the surveys conducted followed the latest presentation to Council this past April."

A former chair of Aurora's Economic Development Advisory Committee, a body which has seen been replaced with a framework for an Economic Development Board, Councillor Michael Thompson said he was pleased with the progress so far, but had concerns about impacted business owners being kept in the loop.

"My one concern is not with the BIA, but with communication with the business community," he said. "When I first saw it on the agenda, I asked that the notice be sent to business owners. While technically it fulfils the legal requirements necessary, alls it does is refer business owners to the Municipal Act to learn more about a BIA and/or the ministry's website for their handbook. It doesn't

talk about what the BIA was going to do for Aurora or really go into even more details.

?We have a responsibility or a standard for engaging our community?There was lots of information. We could have directed them to our website, we had a wonderful presentation and it could have been posted on the Town's website, directing the business owners to that presentation so they could have an understanding of what is being proposed, what some of the visions are. There are numerous reports. I don't think referring them to the municipal act fulfils our standards for engagement. I would think without a doubt, when this comes up at budget for the future Council, there will be business owners who come in and say, 'I didn't understand.' I think we need to utilize the tools we have in our communications department to better communicate with our residents and our businesses.?