

Business leaders build case for new hotel



By Brock Weir

Before Aurora can build a firm case on why hotel chains should invest in the Town, Aurora needs to build a case proving it can support one, according to local businesses.

This was one of the main conclusions to come out of a summit of 20 business, civic and cultural leaders held last Wednesday intended to lay the groundwork to frame Aurora as an ideal place for a new hotel.

Led by Marilee Harris of the Town's Economic Development Advisory Committee and facilitated by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, it was attended by representatives of the Town, including Mayor Geoff Dawe, who outlined cost-prohibitive development charges levied by the Region as one of the main stumbling blocks in attracting a hotel to the area.

The focus of the meeting, however, landed primarily on next steps and looking beyond development charges ? funds that must be paid by incoming developers to account for future growth and strain on infrastructure ? in order to make a proper pitch.

According to Anthony Ierullo, Manager of Long-Range and Strategic Planning for the Town of Aurora, they have been pursuing a hotel project ?for several years?, approaching all the major chains to say Aurora is in the market. This engagement has extended to commercial and industrial realtors to make sure they ?understand Aurora is interested and we feel the market is strong enough to support additional hotel activity in Aurora.?

But, hard numbers will need to be crunched further to ensure they see the market is indeed strong enough, said the business leaders in the room.

They all agreed that that was the case, including Sean McCloskey, Managing Director of Thompson Funeral Home, who said there isn't a week that goes by that bereaved out-of-towners arrive to be with loved ones but are left to find hotel rooms in Newmarket and Richmond Hill instead.

Similarly, sports leaders like Ron Weese of Sport Aurora and Spencer Kanen of the Aurora Youth Soccer Club cited numerous sports tournaments that bring in hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of potential patrons in to Town for the day, but the amenities aren't there to keep them in Aurora through the night.

This is not limited to sports, added Laura Schembri, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre, who said the Centre hosted an international conference of pastel artists last week, bringing in over 60 people who descended on the Centre from Monday to Friday. It was the first conference of its kind at the Centre but, if the amenities for overnight guests were in place, it could be the first of many down the road.

?Hotels are looking for 70 per cent occupancy, so if you have 100 rooms, 365 nights, that's 25,000 room nights a year,? said Mayor Dawe, adding Town Hall has had talks with companies like State Farm, which has up to 18,000 employees, as well York Regional Police and Bulk Barn, which both have their headquarters near the 404, to gauge the viability. ?We talked to State Farm but it is anecdotal. Some of the proponents we have talked to have said they have talked to State Farm and they are good for so many nights a year.

?I think what this group can do [is estimate] how many room nights we can create. At least there is a starting point and how close do we get to those 25,000 rooms.?

This groundwork is already being laid by Sport Aurora in the development of the Town's new Sport Tourism plan, said Mr. Weese, adding they are willing to step it up and help facilitate a wider-ranging survey.

But, it was noted, there is some interest from the hotel industry on the existing hotel site, currently occupied by the defunct Howard Johnson's. Councillor Michael Thompson said ?other parties? have approached the Town with interest on that building, and, according to Mr. Ierullo, this is a fact that has been made known to the property owner.

If something did go through with this building, however, Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny said Aurora needs to aim for that to be a secondary hotel in Town because it does not meet the needs of what today's business travellers expect.

?We need to put a strategy together on how to get this hotel in Aurora,? said Ms. Harris. ?We're all saying as a business community there is an opportunity. As a business community, there are some tactical things we can do with surveys and garnering some data to make a good case. I do think there is a need to step back to define what kind of hotel we are looking for.

?I think to presume we know the hotel business and to presume we can do one survey is flawed. As a group we should at least agree on exactly what kind of hotel we want and [if it includes] a convention centre. Right now we have a product with no customer. We want to get the customer, find out what he wants, and package the product.?