

Cultural Precinct Plan proposes transformation of Downtown Core



(Illustration by FOTENN Consulting)

By Brock Weir

Aurora's Cultural Precinct has the power to be an 'attractive, vibrant, people-focused' neighbourhood, but some significant changes need to be considered before this can become a reality, according to planners.

Councillors formally received the draft plan for the Cultural Precinct, the swath of Aurora's Downtown Core starting at Town Park and radiating out towards Yonge Street and the GO Tracks.

The recommendations and proposals within the plan will be the subject for significant discussion this January but, in the meantime, planted plenty of seeds for future discussion in the weeks ahead.

The vision divides the precinct area into three distinct areas, the first being the quadrant roughly bordered by Yonge Street, Victoria Street, Church Street, and Mosley Street.

This area houses the Aurora Public Library, Aurora Cultural Centre, as well as the former home of the Library and Aurora Seniors' Centre, whose futures have been up for debate for well over a decade. Under this new plan, the latter two buildings are history in favour of a new multi-purpose building that extends outward to Yonge Street, taking the fact the two retail blocks north of the Aurora Public Library are available for purchase.

'Part of the process was to understand what the development potential on the site was,' said Sarah Millar of FOTENN Consulting. 'Over the last month, we took it out to the public and we asked what they wanted to see there. A lot of what we heard was they wanted to see redevelopment. They liked brick facades and they liked the idea of mixed-use development with strong connections to the existing design context.'

To this end, Ms. Millar and fellow planner Michael Stott, saw a further opportunity in expanding Victoria Hall and revamping the existing municipally-owned parking lots in the area. The proposal, they said, is a potential mixed-use midrise building that would help creative industries flourish with a combination of 'live-work' units with commercial spaces at grade and studio apartments and 'alternative housing' above to get people living in the core.

'A lot of what we have been hearing is you want to make this the heart of Aurora,' said Ms. Millar. 'You need activity, you need places to eat, and you need people living here. It is about bringing all of these things into this precinct.'

But activities need places for people to park and the draft plan proposes a large parkade to be built between the Aurora Public Library and the Aurora Cultural Centre to address this issue. This could be up to three storeys and wrapped in a green façade, or other options, to mask the fact it is indeed a parkade. Such a structure could also have a green roof which, said Ms. Millar, was identified as a priority in public consultation.

A new multi-use facility between the Aurora Cultural Centre and Victoria Hall would provide more opportunities for programs to flourish, she added, as well as providing more space for a museum.

‘There is a lot of effort to try and create activity around the perimeter of the precinct but there are these holes in the doughnut where it is just parking or not active and it can be quite isolating,’ said Ms. Millar. ‘We’re trying to create these spaces that allow for people to move around, sit down and relax, have a cup of coffee before going to the Library.’

Before anything can happen, however, more consultation needs to take place, according to the planners, and this includes consultation with the public and local landowners alike to explore further opportunities for development partnerships. The online survey, which has been taking in public opinion since the early fall will also be extended through to the middle of January, according to Mr. Stott.

‘We have had great engagement with the various things you have done,’ said Councillor Michael Thompson. ‘I think the more people who have a chance to view it, the more they will have a chance to provide some feedback and the better off we are. Given that we are heading into the Christmas season and much is happening, if we can extend it a bit without creating too much of a challenge with regards to the deliverables, I think that is great.’

Next Week: The Cultural Precinct's Proposals for Block Two, including Trinity Anglican Church, and a re-think on the usage of Town Park.