

Neighbours "rise up" for better Downtown plan



The outdoor skating rink at Town Park was enjoyed by hockey players and pleasure skaters on Monday night. The draft vision of the Cultural Precinct Plan calls for the rink to be moved to the south end of the park.

By Brock Weir

Aurora's Cultural Precinct should be backed with a concept that can endure for generations, according to area residents.

Councillors took their first formal sweep over a vision for the proposed precinct plan at the Committee level last week, but local neighbours stepped up to fire the first salvo, presenting a vision of their own, arguing the concept on the table fell well short of the mark.

For Susan Morton Leonard, a long-time advocate for heritage and culture in her neighbourhood, the building blocks for a strong plan are there, but they are not reflected in the concept plan created by FOTENN Consultants.

"The plan is not the big and better plan Aurora deserves," said Ms. Morton Leonard. "While we agree with the rationale that culture can be an economic driver, it requires supportive infrastructure to meet the goals. We are not aware of any real research than what has been marketed to us by FOTENN. Are there studies being commissioned by the Town to examine the economic value of the Cultural Precinct or a cost-benefit analysis to understand if the proposed developments will indeed help Aurora?"

Traffic studies were a concern Ms. Morton Leonard shared with fellow resident Lenore Pressley, with both women agreeing they were long overdue in the area.

"While we are not opposed to this, we do have significant concerns about the present plan," said Ms. Pressley of the local Ratepayers Association. "Our association members feel disenfranchised with regard to keeping us informed about plans that affect our area. The residents represented by this ratepayers group live within a few blocks radius of the planned area and in spite of being told by the Town we, as a registered association, would be informed of any change that would affect our area, this did not happen."

Traffic studies, she said, have been requested many times over the past 15 years, yet building, development and redevelopment have rolled on in the heritage neighbourhood and traffic problems have mounted.

"How can the Town approve all this development and determine if the infrastructure in place is adequate to accommodate the increased traffic and parking without doing traffic and parking studies?" she pondered. "How do you think people are going to get around? It seems to us that development in this area is done without any forward planning as far as traffic and parking. With these concerns in mind, we are asking the Town do a traffic study and a new parking study to determine if this Cultural Precinct Plan should even be considered. To do otherwise will confirm that you do not care about the wellbeing of the southeast area residents."

Forward planning is key to the success of this area, according to Ms. Morton Leonard. Over the last few years, she has seen businesses along the historic Yonge Street corridor come and go. They had sufficient parking, she said, but not enough shoppers to keep them afloat. Consideration should also be given to attracting GO Train commuters to venture west from the station and into the Cultural Precinct area for reasons other than picking up their cars for the drive home.

‘If you stand on the GO platform and look west, you can look directly into the west side of Aurora,’ she said. ‘For too long, Aurora’s east and west communities have been divided. We have an opportunity to bring both sides together by using Mosley and Tyler Streets to create a cultural corridor rather than a precinct. Let’s celebrate our thoroughfares. Let’s tell Aurora’s development story.’

‘We need a sophisticated plan that includes a vision that appreciates both Canada’s and the Town’s history; one that creates economic opportunity and supports popular contemporary uses,’ she said.

The concept plan also saw pushback from representatives from Trinity Anglican Church. The vision calls for a pedestrian laneway to be created to the rear of the church, connecting a pathway directly north of the Aurora Public Library and out through to Wells Street, as well as a reconfiguration of the church’s existing parking lot.

Wardens from the church appeared before Councillors to state their opposition, concerned that Council’s vote could be seen as a wholesale approval of the plan.

Although they came at their opposition from different directions, the neighbours – individual and church alike – were united in their belief there is a better option out there.

‘It needs to be based on ideas that can endure for 50 years as well as a century,’ concluded Ms. Morton Leonard. ‘Please rise up to the challenge of a bigger and better plan.’