

Public to get first look at Cultural Precinct plan this week

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents are set to get their first look at concept plans for the proposed downtown ?Cultural Precinct? this week.

Consultants from FOTENN are set to present their preliminary plans to Council this week which will look at ways a significant chunk of Aurora's Downtown Core, starting at Town Park and radiating out to Yonge Street in the west, the GO tracks in the east, and Wellington Street in the north, can be transformed into a hub of creativity, innovation, and connectivity amongst residents.

Once presented to Council, the plans will be made available online for elected officials and residents alike, to digest over the holiday season before the plans come back to Town Hall for further debate in January.

The revitalization and overall future of this area has been the subject of considerable debate over the last decade-and-a-half and has included a number of reports and public information sessions, often focused on what to do with Library Square, the large swath of land on Victoria Street currently occupied by the Church Street School and Aurora Cultural Centre, and the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Aurora Seniors' Centre.

This time, through a series of public consultations, ranging from walking tours of the area, public open houses, and a ?Culture Quest? which put a fun spin on information finding, municipal staff and lawmakers alike say they believe they might now finally have a plan with some traction.

Council took an early opportunity to discuss the plan-to-come at last week's General Committee meeting, giving tentative approval for a \$21,185 increase to FOTENN Consultants' contract with the Town to lay the foundation of implementing their findings.

?This was a new process, something new to Council and we weren't quite sure whether we were going to get a product that was successful in moving forward to the implementation phase, so we did not want to execute a contract with the consultant until we had some level of comfort with regards to the success of this plan and moving forward with the implementation,? said Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation.

The implementation phase, he noted, will look at a number of areas including strategizing the priorities, looking at land banking opportunities and working with the private sector and landowners to make that a reality, and examining the level of participation required by the municipality to bring it forward.

?Forgive me for being a little gun shy with regards to the development in this particular area but, as you know, we have tried several different things, we weren't quite sure whether this would work and we did not wish to commit Council to a fee on a plan you felt did not have an opportunity to be successful.?

Councillors expressed a general optimism on the Cultural Precinct but Councillor Wendy Gaertner raised concerns on a potential stumbling block: the level of buy-in from area residents. Some members of the local ratepayers association have been calling for a special meeting with consultants to discuss plans for the precinct, the area in which they live.

Mr. Downey, however, said he has not agreed to their request as while these residents live in the area in question, the Cultural Precinct is a ?community-wide? strategy and, in the end, they would then have to have separate meetings with all of Aurora's ratepayer groups.

?I absolutely disagree with that,? said Councillor Gaertner. ?The people who live in this area are going to have to live with whatever we decide as a Council to put in their area and I think they have a special vested interest. They absolutely should be consulted as a group and I am very unhappy to hear it is not happening. Something is going to be imposed on them and I would like them to be happy with what is coming.?

Throughout the consultation process, however, residents from the area have participated in a number of roundtable discussion and fact-finding events and this, to some Councillors, allayed these concerns.

‘Everyone who was sitting at the table I was working with [at a roundtable discussion held Friday] was a property owner within the Cultural Precinct,’ said Councillor Tom Mrakas. ‘As long as the residents come out and they are aware, that is all that matters.’

Added Councillor Thompson: ‘We encourage all residents to participate. We want to be inclusive in this. They certainly have been welcomed and encouraged to participate in any previous workshops and future opportunities to provide comments and feedback from them. I don't know if it was in an official capacity or not, but certainly there were members of the Ratepayers' Association and property owners [there].’