

Re-think urged for Aurora's Community Improvement Plan on accessibility, sustainability and affordability

Council members are urging a re-think on Aurora's Community Improvement Plan after uptake from downtown business and property owners was less than hoped for.

The Town designated the Aurora Promenade – the core of the Yonge and Wellington gateways – as a Community Improvement Area (CIP), a move which included financial incentives to encourage long-term private sector investments in new and existing developments.

Eligible improvements, including façade renovations, would see some reimbursements and/or tax relief through the CIP.

After CIP goals fell short, the Town initiated a review of the program to determine which goals were ultimately met. The resulting report, which was presented to Council at last week's General Committee meeting, focuses on four key themes: sustainability, heritage, accessibility and affordable housing.

A few of the Town's neighbouring municipalities offer accessibility-related grants as an eligible expense within their Building Restoration and Improvement Program, said Economic Development Officer Nick Kazakoff in the report. For example, the Township of King offers the installation of automatic doors and accessibility ramps as an eligible expense in their Property Improvement Grant. Similarly, the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville offers eligible expenses for barrier-free entry under their Building Façade and Signage Loan program. King's maximum eligible grant amount is \$10,000 and Whitchurch-Stouffville is \$15,000.

The inclusion of accessibility improvement investments in the Aurora Promenade CIP could be easily addressed by adding them as an eligible expense as part of the Building Restoration, Renovation, and Improvement Program similar to Whitchurch-Stouffville's CIP.

Other neighbouring municipalities offer grants related to sustainability, which Aurora could also pursue. King, for instance, covers improvements to energy and water efficiency within buildings, with similar programs also instigated in Bradford.

It is recommended that Aurora considers adding eligible expenses related to sustainability, such as water efficiency upgrades, to their existing Tax-based Redevelopment Program, noted Kazakoff. This approach has been successfully demonstrated in close by and comparable municipalities. Additionally, Middlesex County is a comparable municipality to Aurora and has taken the initiative to offer an entirely separate CIP initiative that includes many important sustainability improvements with a maximum eligible grant amount of \$7,500. Therefore, Aurora may consider adopting a similar program for the promenade CIP as it would greatly advance sustainability efforts and be within an affordable budget range.

Heritage improvements, he added, were already covered within the CIP plans but including affordable housing as well could be a problem.

The addition of an affordable housing financial component in the Aurora Promenade CIP may be out of the scope as it would require significant cost analysis in order to realize any benefit. However, non-financial incentives could be developed and offered under a CIP. For instance, projects that offer an affordable or attainable housing component might be eligible for a streamlined planning process, fee deferment plans, or assistance with grant applications from the Region, Province, or Federal granting levels.

Reviewing the potential paths forward last week, Council members welcomed a further look into the new proposed areas the CIP could cover, but a missing element in the report, noted Councillor Michael Thompson, was an analysis on why uptake for the existing program was so low.

“We need to have a frank look at the original CIP plan that we rolled out,” he said. “We had a lot of fanfare and expectations and hope around it and utilized best practices then but there was very little uptake. We had very few applications and what I would like to see this time around are some true measures on what a successful plan looks like. It's great to have all of this, it's great to stick the money aside and provide it where there is merit, but at the same time, it is good to have some metrics on what our expectation is in terms of the return on investment here—in terms of what we expect on an annual basis in terms of applications so we can actually assess whether or not the program is successful.”

Councillors Wendy Gaertner and Sandra Humfries offered similar viewpoints, with the former requesting further information on how these programs might be funded going forward.

“We have to put out an expectation in some people's minds,” said Councillor Gaertner. “Can we then fulfil the ability to be presenting some of these things, even one of these things, if there was a certain uptake? I think that piece needs to be explored before this comes back again.”

Added Councillor Humfries: “I am not sure how many businesses or organizations utilized this opportunity, but there's so much that can be done with the revitalization of downtowns. It's coming at a perfect time. I hope there's lots of effort put in around how much we need to put aside, how it is going to work, and how we can make a strong communication process so everyone understands what's available to them, what's in it, and what they need to contribute to help as well.”

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