

Rent is top concern for Business Continuity Task Force

Local small businesses are facing many challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic, not the least of which is finding the means to pay their rent.

This was one of the primary concerns of the local business community when they convened virtually on Friday morning for the second meeting of the Aurora Business Continuity Task Force.

A joint initiative of the Town of Aurora and the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, the purpose of the Task Force is to 'help find creative ways to assist Aurora's small businesses' and now the first order of business is to help property owners and businesses communicate on a path forward.

'What we are constantly hearing is the same thing we have been advocating to the Province and the Feds for is rent, rent, rent. We're hearing from tenants and we're also hearing from landlords as well,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas immediately following Friday's session. 'We understand that while the businesses and the tenants are struggling through this unprecedented time that some of the landlords are in the same struggle, the same situation, so we're hearing it from both ends, but what we're also hearing is some are not responding. Some landlords are not responding to tenants' calls, emails.

'Part of our discussion was if we can get a list of all those we're hearing from who are not responding, I will be personally calling each one of those landlords because, as I have said a couple of times now, this is unacceptable. Everyone's situation is different and it is a case by case thing that we should be looking at but, at the same time, in the times we're in right now, there is no excuse not to pick up the phone or respond by email and explain clearly what can be and what can't be done ' and if there are things the landlord and tenant can do together to try and help each other during this time.

'I am going to make it a priority of mine that any landlord that I hear of that is not responding to a tenant, I will be making that call to them.'

Beyond a phone call, however, municipalities have limited means of doing much else to bring landlords to the table, according to Ontario's Municipal Act. What they can do, however, is a measure the Town put in place in March: providing a property tax break to commercial business owners ' but only if they can prove that the break they are receiving is benefiting their tenants as well.

'If you want a deferral, you have to have a signed agreement that you're going to be passing it along to your tenants, otherwise you're not going to get a deferral from the Town,' says Mayor Mrakas. 'What are we legally allowed to do? What do we have the authority to do? What are all the

tools available to us, our solicitor, our CAO, our ELT team? Everyone is working on those things to be able to see what we absolutely can do and I can tell you that whatever is available to us, we will implement to ensure that there is a working relationship between the landlords and the tenants at this point. Beyond that, you need the Province and the Federal government come in and put in actual measures that can be implemented. Most of the things we can do is the advocacy part.?

At the moment, no one knows just how long this pandemic ? and Emergency Orders put in place ? will last, but the Aurora Business Continuity Task Force is looking ahead to the future.

?We have talked about the here and now, but we have also talked about moving forward because we have to be proactive in our approach and look at once we get out of this, what is going to happen? How do we get our businesses back up and running?? said the Mayor. ?The same as the Premier talks about, the economic recovery, how do we implement things that will help our businesses start to flourish again? We're going to start taking an approach to looking at beyond the current state and moving forward six months and a year from now and what we can do to put those things in place.?

By Brock Weir