

Aurora and Newmarket await word on university bid

By Brock Weir

Aurora, Newmarket and King will be anxiously awaiting this week for word on whether their efforts to dazzle York University for an 'Aurora-Newmarket' campus for York University did the trick.

York University is expected to release its shortlist of the top two bids for a satellite campus in York Region later this week.

Last week, they received an extensive pitch from Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, Newmarket Mayor Tony Van Bynen, Newmarket Regional Councillor John Taylor and Dr. Dave Williams, CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre, on why a 60 acre parcel of land straddling the Aurora-Newmarket border would be the ideal location for a university campus.

The land in question stems out from the northeast corner of Yonge Street and St. John's Sideroad.

According to details released jointly from Aurora and Newmarket last week, the 60 acre proposal is within a greater 240 acre parcel slated for future development which boasts 'mature forested parkland, rivers and streams', in addition to being 'strategically located between the robust business centres of both communities forming the centrepiece of an educational, economic, social and cultural corridor linking both municipalities.'

The land also has the added bonus of being close to Yonge Street, and the future growth of rapid transit, which the Province of Ontario stated was a key concern in selecting a site for a future university.

'[Our proposal] is pretty nicely located to benefit both of our communities,' said Mayor Dawe. 'One of the guiding principles from the provincial government is it has to be on a transit corridor and that is certainly there with the rapid transit network coming through from VIVA.'

'There is a proximity to GO stations both here and in Newmarket, and a potential GO station going into the southeast end of Newmarket. It will be well-serviced by transit, it is already serviced in terms of infrastructure needs, both water and wastewater and storm water management, that is already there, and it is a nice combination of developable land and environmental land.'

Added Aurora CAO Neil Garbe: 'We thought [the urban/rural mix] was part of the attractiveness of the site. [York] was definitely looking for something that was related to an emerging urban centre, but we thought there was a real advantage of having it in environmental lands that should an option come or desire to come for an environmental studies program you would have a living laboratory, a pastoral setting, and a nice setting to go to school.'

'Some of the other universities like Queens, they have a really great way of intertwining the natural environment of the campus. There are a number of benefits with that.'

Following last Thursday's pitch, both municipalities described theirs as a 'unique and innovative partnership' to host a campus not only for York University, but also Seneca College, which was something of a late-coming addition to the bid. The 'Aurora-Newmarket' bid also gained the support of King Township.

The bid also has the backing of Southlake Regional Health Centre, which sees further opportunities should York University, and ultimately the Province of Ontario, accept the Aurora-Newmarket bid.

'Southlake has enjoyed long-standing and mutually beneficial partnerships with both York University and Seneca College,' said Dave Williams, CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre, in a statement. 'We have collaborated with York on a variety of research projects and hundreds of nursing and allied health students from both schools benefit from exposure to real-world experiences at Southlake each year.'

“We are expanding on these formidable partnerships with our CreateIT Now innovation centre that will bring private-sector organizations together with academic institutions and Southlake resources to nurture entrepreneurship in the health sector. This will enable us to find and implement innovative ideas that have the ability to transform healthcare.”

During the pitch, proponents like Mayors Dawe and Van Bynen, as well as Regional Councillor Taylor and Dr. Williams, were questioned on how a new university campus would make a difference in their respective communities. There were no shortage of examples of how a move would benefit the local economy, health sectors, and, of course, education, according to Mayor Dawe.

“The economic benefit it would bring to our two towns is pretty substantial,” he said. “This is obviously long-term development ? it is obviously not going to be popping up next week ? even to start off with construction jobs. There are opportunities and there are all sorts of spin-offs. Dr. Williams was there because we see a great synergy with the hospital and York has a desire to get into more medical-based education.”

While Aurora, Newmarket, King and Southlake await word back on the pitch, if it is a success, their next steps will be continuing work to secure the land.

A possible sticking point in the proposal is that the lands in question, both in Aurora and Newmarket, are still privately held. Proponents of the bid, including Mayor Dawe and Aurora CEO Neil Garbe, would not comment on the details of the land negotiations at this point, but they did confirm the lands are indeed privately held and talks have not yet concluded.

The question remains, however, on whether Aurora and Newmarket would wait and see if their bid was successful before proceeding further with land negotiations or run the risk of being left holding the bag on a significant parcel of land.

“I think we need to secure it as much as we can,” said Mr. Garbe.

Added Mayor Dawe: “It is all part of the negotiation we are going through. There would be no need for us to have that land if the university did not go through.”

After the two-bid strong shortlist is revealed this week, the two municipalities left vying for York University's attention can expect to hear the results at a meeting of York Regional Council scheduled for mid-May. Proposals will then be submitted to the Province for ultimate approval, likely by the end of September.