

Aurora continues quest to snag post-secondary presence

By Brock Weir

Aurora and Newmarket might still be smarting from losing a bid for a new university campus to Markham back in 2014, but Aurora has not yet given up hope of attracting a post-secondary presence.

An announcement of a post-secondary development could be announced as early as this fall, according to the Town's Economic Development Action Plan.

One of the last remaining items of Aurora's former Economic Development Advisory Committee, which will be reconstituted into a Board before the end of the year, the forecast calls for the continuing advancement of both a post-secondary presence in Aurora, as well as an innovation incubator with a potential Fall 2017 announcement.

While talks pertaining to both the post-secondary possibility and innovation incubator are subject to confidentiality, Aurora's Manager of Long Range and Strategic Planning, Anthony Ierullo, confirms continued engagement on the file.

It is a key priority for Council in both our Strategic Plan and some of our other key planning documents, says Mr. Ierullo. The idea of some potential post-secondary presence, as well as an innovation incubator-type concept is something Council and the community has determined is something that could be a good fit in Aurora and something that could support the community. We continue to engage and seek partners and identify opportunities. That continues to be active and we continue to explore some of those opportunities.

Aurora has been down this road before.

Both Aurora and Newmarket expressed disappointment when their joint bid to host a satellite campus of York University on land straddling both municipalities was nixed in favour of the City of Markham. Bids from Markham, Richmond Hill and Vaughan made the short list, with Aurora and Newmarket left behind, the southern municipalities finding an edge when it came to transportation infrastructure and their vibrant urban centres.

Aurora has also pitched the possibility of an innovation incubator before, with a proposal to transform the former home of the Aurora Public Library on Victoria Street into just such a maker space, complete with development technology, 3D printers and other forms of maker spaces, extending the shelf life of the run-down building by several years.

Despite these speedbumps along the way, Aurora remains committed to the benefits both or either options would bring to a community such as this.

Giving opportunities for residents to access post-secondary training is something I think a lot of [municipalities] find important in terms of building complete communities and giving residents, whether it be youth, seniors or the general population an opportunity build skills and a different way for us to encourage engagement, said Mr. Ierullo. The flipside of that is looking for potential partners to take some of this knowledge and commercialize it into business opportunities, the idea that someone has a passion towards a specific area within our community they can build a bit of training and turn that into a product or a business, something that could be commercialized and add additional value in terms of employment.

Employment is a key driver for us from a strategy perspective, it is something that our Council has told us and, quite honestly, when we went out for consultation on various documents it is something that was identified by the public as well. It is pretty clear that it is a strategy that could help add something to the community that perhaps isn't fully there and add a lot of great spin-offs. Synergies are also possible with employment lands on the east side of Aurora between Leslie Street and Highway 404, he added, which have been subject to ongoing talks with landowners for the creation of a possible medical campus or cluster.

The idea of a medical cluster that includes research practitioners and manufacturers is something that was identified as a potential strategy for some of our new business parks and it is something we continue to pursue with the property owners who are bringing lands to market, he said.