

Aurora Town Square will report on successes, challenges twice a year

Aurora Town Square will mark the second anniversary of its completion in 2026 and, as they look to the future, they will now report to Council twice annually on their successes.

Council considered an update to the Aurora Town Square (ATS) business plan last week.

While there were many successes to report, local lawmakers requested more regular reports to Council on their financial results, bookings, programming outcomes and more.

“As Aurora's population continues to grow, so too has interest and participation in arts and cultural events,” said Phil Rose, Manager of Cultural Services. “Recent national indicators show that while the GDP of Canada's cultural sector grew modestly by 0.2 per cent in early 2025, there is a notable increase in engagement with visual and applied arts, reflecting a shift toward more immersive and relevant cultural experiences.

“Locally, Aurora has seen a steady expansion in cultural and community programming. ATS presents a timely and strategic opportunity to meet the diversifying cultural interests of Aurora and the broader York Region. It is well-positioned to leverage the public's favourable perception of culture and the evolving philanthropic landscape to drive meaningful community impact.”

Aurora's cultural landscape is “thriving,” said Rose in his report, noting that thus far in 2025, the Town has hosted more than 50 cultural, heritage, and recreational experiences at Town Square. At the same time, however, he noted Town Square will still be in its “ramp-up period” for three to five years.

Given the five-year “ramp-up period,” Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland questioned the revenue benchmarks set by Aurora Town Square to “avoid” a further impact on the tax levy.

“Looking at 2026 in particular, we have a series of revenue targets related to ticket sales, programming and rentals,” said Rose. “In terms of rentals and staff recoveries, the one caveat I would mention is that the way that we put the budget together last time was this sort of a budget that aggregated everything, including maintenance fees or maintenance and facility costs, business support costs, customer service, marketing communications”. We have a target of about \$300,000 for rentals and staff recoveries. This year, our target was \$260,000 and we've more or less reached that. We still have a few more rentals between now and the end of the year.

“Next year we're looking at \$314,000 in staff recoveries [and] we're looking at about \$200,000 in ticket sales. That's a combination of programming and ticket sales for performances.”

60% of expenditures, he added, go towards salaries, but they have been “all-hands on deck” this year using existing staff to do their own front-of-house work for programs to stay within budget.

“This year, because we've been in Year One, we've been able to really be cautious of our expenditures as the revenue grows. We've been quite good in making sure that we haven't fully spent all of the expenditure lines as we've ramped up,” Rose continued. “We're kind of hitting our stride a little bit now and figured out, I think, now what resonates with the community.”

Responding to Rose's answers, Councillor Gilliland said everybody wants to “feel comfortable” with the expectations moving forward and put a motion on the table to have regular reports coming back to Council. While Councillor Gilliland suggested annually, a friendly amendment put forward by Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson and approved by Council upped the frequency to twice a year.

“It's so new and we're still trying to drive the business model,” said Councillor Thompson. “I'm happy to support [an annual report] but I just find that an annual report, you're really looking back and it's too late to change anything. If, for whatever reason, bookings

aren't where we want it to be, or if there's some issues, if it at least comes every six months then Council may choose to take a more direct approach to be able to assist and drive what we hope is a very successful year.?

The report before Council was ?fulsome,? said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who added he felt it showed Town Square staff had their ?finger on the pulse? of the community, but questioned when they envisioned the ATS model becoming self-sustainable, profitable, and able to break-even.

?Break-even is not likely ? a cultural facility like this, the amount of staff, the amount of things that are happening, we've done this through all the different performing arts centres and similar cultural facilities throughout York Region, and we're happy to provide that information, but they're subsidized or, in some cases, highly subsidized by the community,? replied Rose. ?I don't think that's ever the vision. Right now, we're working on the net operating budget of \$1.07 million. I think as we scale up, I think? our plan is that we will begin to see more rentals, we will begin to see more ticket sales.

?We've been very cautious as well in terms of the accessibility of the performances we've put on, so the ticket prices are quite low. We want it to continue to be accessible for the community. We'll try to keep them low, but we'll also increase them to make sure we're keeping pace at least with inflation.?

?Nobody expects a business like this to get right off the mark in one year, two years, even three years, but I just wanted to ask the question because I know the public is asking these kinds of questions and, from my standpoint, I think you've done a fantastic job in there and filling the place and there's a lot of excitement in it,? said Councillor Weese.

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