

Aurorans want Cultural Precinct to be 'civic focal point', say consultants

By Brock Weir

The results are in and the survey says residents want Aurora's 'Cultural Precinct' to be a focal point for the Town.

This is the word brought to Council last week by Michael Scott and Sarah Miller, two consultants tasked with devising a design and vision for Aurora's cultural heart that could finally bring some momentum to a project that has seen several starts and stops over the last 15 years.

Aurora's Cultural Precinct is a vision that radiates westward from Town Park, encompassing several area landmarks including the Aurora Cultural Centre, a number of heritage homes, several churches and the Aurora Public Library before hitting the east side of Yonge Street.

Talks have taken place with local lawmakers, stakeholders, comments were received at visioning sessions and a community walk through the neighbourhood, and an online survey was recently concluded. While the results of the survey are still being studied, preliminary results show that 64 per cent of respondents prioritized maintaining the facades of heritage buildings.

77 per cent said the maintenance of green space was important, 49 per cent cited walkability as very important, while 72 per cent said they warmed to the idea of 'Aurora's Cultural Heart' being an 'appealing opportunity for growth.'

'The important part of any story is the vision,' said Mr. Scott. 'What we have developed here, I think, is a vision that very succinctly captures what we have talked about with the community. It is really based on the idea that we want to set the Cultural Precinct [as] not only an attractive environment and people-focused district that is strongly connected to the Town's centre and adjacent neighbourhoods, but also connected to other community destinations. [We need to] build on this as a larger puzzle.'

'It will also become, in our view, an opportunity to celebrate a local community hub that has year-round activities that serves as a focal point in particular for the arts, cultural, tourism and creative industries. We have discussed having the need for additional cultural facilities that build on things, most notably the Church Street School and how to set the precinct apart from other areas in Town and make it a focal point for the future.'

The Cultural Precinct, he added, should be 'the fundamental true heart' of Aurora with innovative design elements, integrated land use, engaging programming while also serving as the hub of a creative economy that will 'set Aurora apart' from its neighbours. The hub, he noted, should be one of artistic creation, innovation, production and presentation 'but to make it happen, it needs to have the 'necessary vision and resources' to make it a reality.

When the consultants began their study of the Downtown Core, they wanted to understand its 'connections' to the public and surrounding areas. It should be a district that has a clear sense of arrival and transitions, with strengths that should be highlighted. They explored opportunities for a perceived parking crunch in the neighbourhood, and alleviating parking concerns around Town Park, including changing the existing spaces to parallel parking.

'People shared they love Town Park events,' said Ms. Miller. 'They wanted to see a larger space for the museum, that came out loud and clear, maintaining heritage landmarks in the precinct was important, [as well] as guidelines for infill development [while maintaining] a small-town feel.'

'While they appreciated this would be a focal area for Aurora and an opportunity for growth, they also felt that the small town feel needed to be maintained. We saw some shared vision for both municipal staff and the public as being the maintenance of architectural character and quality, the redevelopment of certain buildings in the community, streetscape improvements and the potential for street closures and traffic calming in certain elements of the precinct.'

A further public meeting to discuss the future of the Cultural Precinct is planned for Saturday, November 28. A final vision and concept plan is targeted to be presented to Council in the first week of December.

In the meantime, however, the Cultural Precinct is likely to next come before Council at the November 24 Council meeting following a motion from Councillor John Abel. In his motion, the Councillor calls for an additional study to be carried out for a 'vision and conceptual plan' for a Cultural Precinct across Yonge Street for Temperance Street, ideally within the first quarter of 2016.

'There is an area bounded by Yonge Street to the east, Mill Street to the west, Wellington Street to the north and Tyler Street to the south with many significant historic buildings and buildings of heritage value which could be considered the Cultural Precinct West or Temperance Street Cultural Precinct and could benefit from a study,' said Councillor Abel in his notice of motion.