

?Bold and courageous? decisions needed to get Chamber back on track



By Brock Weir

There is a rough road ahead for the Aurora Chamber of Commerce as it looks to rebrand at a ?pivotal stage in its evolution.?

That was the picture painted by newly-minted Chamber Chair Javed Kahn as he was formally appointed to his new position last week, taking over from outgoing Chair Patricia Poulin-Ulbricht.

The Aurora Chamber of Commerce has recently had to make ?tough decisions? after a number of recent hits, including falling short of revenue expectations for the third year running, according to Ms. Poulin-Ulbricht. They might have been watchful, constantly assessed where they were, but the desired outcomes just did not materialize. To help in having the resources required to right the ship, they have disbanded the position of CEO and, instead, overhauled their Board of Directors to act in a managerial capacity.

?We are a Chamber in transition,? said Ms. Poulin-Ulbricht in her final speech as Chair. ?When I took the position of First Vice Chair two years ago, the Board, the CEO and the staff were very aware that tough decision-making was on the horizon if the targets and budgeted revenues were not met.

Unfortunately, we are in good company as there are many chambers that are near and dear to ours that are facing the same decisions and they have made bold and courageous decisions.?

Where these ?bold and courageous? decisions will come from will now be in the hands of a newly-elected Board led by Mr. Kahn, who first joined the Chamber with his marketing firm.

The Aurora Chamber, he said, is now at a ?pivotal? stage and echoed his predecessor's remarks that they are not alone. Travelling around Ontario and visiting with a number of Chambers, Mr. Kahn said he has heard the same feedback over and over again that the entire Chamber network is a challenged beast.

?We are challenged with providing and maintaining value to our members and what ?member value? means is still for all of us to define,? he said. ?We are challenged with retaining members, convincing them to allocate their hard-earned budget to our Chamber. We are challenged with staying relevant, not only within our own business community, but our community at large.?

The Aurora Chamber of Commerce, he said, should be part of the community's ?conversation? and ensure they are an institution that is needed and wanted by local businesses.

?If we were to announce next week that we were closing our offices, would anyone miss us?? he asked.

Challenges in answering this question will be posed by attracting new generations of local business owners into the Chamber fold, leveraging new technology to engage with the community, and rethinking what it means to be a Chamber member.

?Do we need to have members, or do we simply embrace any business that would like to participate and engage with us?? he pondered. ?For the next few months, I will be working closely with staff and our Board to develop a two-year strategic plan that will incorporate our vision, our theme, and tactics that are going to support this pivotal stage of our chamber. I equate this to a full audit of our events, opportunities, new ways to engage, understand member value, to looking at what we did in our past and whether some of those ideas would work in the present.?

This study is slated to be presented to the Chamber membership by the end of January, he added.

In his opening speech, Mr. Kahn ruled out the possibility of the Aurora Chamber merging with any of the neighbouring chambers ?in the foreseeable future,? but stressed the Aurora Chamber needs to be more open and willing to look at collaboration with others.

?It is an important element for us to survive, thrive and evolve in the times,? he said. ?This is not a new concept.?