

Business owners 'really excited' to get started on BIA

By Brock Weir

Business owners in Aurora's historic Downtown Core have been working behind the scenes for over a year on establishing a new Business Improvement Area to steer revitalization.

Now, with Council's blessing, they are hard at work taking the Business Improvement Area (BIA) to the next level.

Council last week approved a new bylaw establishing a new BIA for Downtown Aurora which will extend from Mosley Street, moving northwards towards Yonge and Wellington, and then moving eastward from Yonge and Wellington to the GO Station.

Bringing together local property and business owners, business advocates and lawmakers, the aim of the BIA is to preserve and attract people back into the downtown core while promoting the area as a place for residents to work, shop and play.

Helping to spearhead the establishment of the BIA is Joanne Russo, who owns a business on Wellington Street East.

'I don't know if this is newspaper material, but woowoooooooooo!' said Ms. Russo with a laugh when asked of her reaction to Council's unanimous decision to pass the BIA bylaw. 'We're really excited.'

In looking to the future of the BIA, Ms. Russo made a nod to its past. In their efforts to get something up and running, she says she has learned a great deal about the history of past BIAs, which have fizzled for various reasons.

The last one, she said, was instrumental in paving the Temperance Street parking lot behind what is now Aw, Shucks. The light fixtures and flower beds that feature along the historic Yonge Street corridor are also legacies left behind by the last BIA.

'It is unfortunate that that committee didn't continue on, but we're happy to make new changes because it has been some time and all business owners and property owners do want to see a revamping,' says Ms. Russo. 'I am hoping that moving forward we can get the cooperation from the Town and everybody else can see the change because we so need it.'

In a report before Council last week, Aurora's Economic Development Office said outreach had taken place amongst impacted property owners, who will pay a levy to the BIA to fund many of their initiatives. The report noted that objections were received from just six per cent of property owners.

Ms. Russo says in her experience the only objection was from members of the former BIA committee.

'One of their big concerns was they didn't have so much support from the Town when the BIA was there,' she says. 'Local business owners felt that they had to constantly fund, and that's what their disappointment was: they didn't have as much participation from the Town of Aurora that they were hoping to receive. I hope that is not the case moving forward. The response we got from the Town is they were really excited and happy to see this change, and they want this change.'

'Funding is always a concern, especially if you are looking at the Town to obtain additional funding. We are being varied with our budget and our forecasts are being very realistic as to small changes that need to be made, but small changes are important enough in seeing if we can get support from local sponsorships. We hope the Town really does help with the funding and the participation as they promised they will.'

Now that the bylaw has been passed, the next step is for proponents of the BIA to sit down and establish their board. Ms. Russo says they are sitting down with a number of local people who have expressed an interest in the BIA, including Sandra Ferri, Executive Director of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, to form a board that has 'strong involvement from the community.'

They hope to bring on board organizations like the Aurora Cultural Centre for both their insight and potential partnership opportunities.

Input from members of the previous BIA will also be essential in steering this group forward.

Much of this work will be going on behind the scenes, but the first place Aurora residents are likely to see the BIA in action is the lead-up to the holiday season.

The BIA, as it stands, has set a number of goals based around the four seasons. Christmas, of course, is the next major holiday on the calendar and they are working together with the Cultural Centre, the Aurora Public Library and the Aurora Farmers' Market on potential programming opportunities. They will be present in November's Santa Under the Stars parade, for instance, and they hope to facilitate a contest for downtown business owners on the best decorated storefront.

'I think the excitement is already there,' says Ms. Russo. 'When we went door knocking, they all said, 'Finally!' We haven't received any negativity, and now it is just a matter of saying, what do you feel? One of the things we have thought about is something like the Taste of the Danforth (for local restaurants) and what their insights would be on what we could bring to Downtown Aurora. Involvement is very important and asking businesses what they feel would attract customers into either their restaurants or their retail stores is key.'