

Chamber members seek "accountability" in new path forward



By Brock Weir

As they continue their efforts to get "back to business", the Aurora Chamber of Commerce is placing an increased emphasis on being advocates for local businesses.

Members, however, said they want to see action "and soon."

Chamber members had their first chance to weigh in on the organization's future last Wednesday as Board Chair Javed Khan laid out their strategic plan for the next few years.

"Our mission now is to be a progressive community leader," Mr. Khan told the packed house. "We want to be engaged, we definitely want to focus on community prosperity, and we want to focus on everyone in this room [to] move your business forward."

"When it comes to re-establishing the value and visibility of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce brand, first we need to strengthen our relationship with the Town of Aurora. We firmly believe that it is the number one priority for us as a Chamber. We need to get back to really being a strong partner with the Town of Aurora, with the Mayor's office, with the new CAO's office, and with staff."

To this end, the Chamber said they will be working to have a member of their Board on hand to participate in as many municipal meetings as possible to weigh in on local business decisions as they progress, rather than reacting to them after they are done deals.

In addition, a revitalized Chamber means a revitalized sense of relevance amongst members, Mr. Khan added. At this point, plans to realise that goal are still being looked at, but plans are underway to bring in 84 new members by the end of June, reaching out to 800 area businesses, putting a renewed focus on young professionals, coordinating economic roundtables within the Region, and forming partnerships among stakeholders and all levels of government.

"No longer will be the Chamber you don't hear from," said Patricia Poulin-Ulbricht, Past Chair of the Chamber.

Added Mr. Khan: "We want to demonstrate being more proactive when it comes to your success as a business in our community."

But many of those in the room, however, stepped up to say they wanted less talk and more action.

One member, for instance, questioned the Chamber's relationships with landlords with an eye on what can be done to get businesses to move into the vacant storefronts in Aurora's Downtown Core.

That, said Mr. Khan, is something the Chamber needs to work for and that could stem from a strengthened new relationship with the

Town of Aurora.

Another said he heard a ?lot of buzzwords and it was like sitting in an MBA program at York University.?

?You hit all the words, but they are shallow,? he said.

Following these comments, Mr. Khan said input from the members on the plan ? which he characterised as a ?living, fluid document? at the outset of the meeting ? made the issue of accountability shoot up to the top of their priority list.

?The number one thing after today is accountability,? he said. ?We have to deliver. We can all say this stuff, but if we're not accountable and we don't deliver, it is exactly what you said: it's shallow. That is where the hole has been dug. We do a lot of great social events, but when it comes to advocacy and representing the business community in front of individuals in this Town who are the decision-makers, we have been absent.?

Others, such as former councillor Bill Hogg, said what was presented to the membership last week seemed like a ?laundry list? without ?critical priorities? being identified. Without that being done, it will be hard to get a buy-in from Chamber members.

?The leadership of this organization needs to reach out and identify what the priorities are first and then clarify what those three to five are,? said Mr. Hogg, responding to a questionnaire on feedback circulated to each table. ?We can't do it all. When you know what you are going to do, I either buy into the vision and get on board, or I don't. Right now I have no vision. What I have right now is a boiler-plate strategic plan that you can slug in virtually any Town's name into the vision, mission and strategies. I am not saying they are bad, but there is more work to be done before you start asking me to get involved.?

But this is just the beginning, according to Mr. Khan.

?This is a first step and we're not necessarily asking everyone to get involved,? he said. ?When we want to get certain things done, we need a collective. This is phase 1-A. We need to keep going. This is not the end.?