

Chamber wants answers on vacant storefronts

By Brock Weir

Next month, Mayor Geoff Dawe is set to deliver his annual address to the local business community.

It's usually a time for the Mayor to give a 'state of the town' talk to local business leaders and tout some of the businesses set to make Aurora home in the year ahead. In the lead-up to this year's speech, however, the Aurora Chamber of Commerce is pressing for answers.

'One thing which we really don't think has been addressed, specifically in Aurora, is the ongoing and pretty consistent flow of leasing signs coming up,' says Javed Khan, Chair of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. 'We are finding more and more businesses are either closing and leaving and we're unfortunately seeing a higher rate of leasing signs in the main corridor of our community and we have still not gotten the answer why, and what the plan is for the Town to mitigate this.'

'This is a conversation we would like to have and have our Mayor address at the upcoming Mayor's luncheon.'

It was also a conclusion Mr. Khan says came out of recent talks with the Chamber Executive on ways they can continue to be an advocate for the local business community.

They are 'frustrated,' he says, 'that they have not received a 'clear and concise answer' from the powers-that-be, despite repeated questions.'

'We asked that it be addressed when we were having the Mayor's luncheon in 2016 to address it and it seems like it wasn't necessarily a priority for them to focus on that; they wanted to focus more on the Cultural Precinct and the whole Yonge and Wellington Corridor,' says Mr. Khan. 'But, we consistently have our members in that type of conversation at various Chamber events asking what is happening? Why are there more and more vacancies happening, and what is the Town doing?'

'I understand [CAO Doug Nadorozny] is revamping the economic development structure [at Town Hall] and that is welcome, and I'm excited to see what comes out of that, but other than that, it has certainly been a common conversation.'

Last year, the Chamber took a more proactive role in advocating for the perennial issue of a new hotel for the Town of Aurora. These talks have proved to be more fruitful at Town Hall, says Mr. Khan, with 'a strong potential of a decision being made in the very, very near future,' but this year they are also going to move forward with their advocacy work, joining the Ontario Chamber of Commerce with their call for better energy pricing at the Provincial level.

Both have called on the Ontario Government to take 'bold steps' to address the issue of affordable energy across the board. The Ontario Chamber submitted their support of a Long Term Energy Plan last month calling on the Government 'to ensure that future policies regarding energy pricing are affordable, transparent and flexible' particularly through the adoption of a capacity market system.

This, they argue, could realise some 'significant' cost savings by allowing the procurement of energy shorter term on a cost efficient basis.

'The common thing we're getting is that constant price increases and the lack of price predictability is impacting the ability for many of the businesses in this province to remain competitive and grow,' says Mr. Khan. 'When I was talking to one of the representatives from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC), they indicated that one central firm reported that their recent energy bill was 12 per cent higher in September ' and that is about \$500 or so ' despite an identical meter reading in August. In this particular case the OCC member indicated to me that that fluctuation forced his business into a hiring freeze because it wasn't planned for. If there is an opportunity for the Ontario Government to increase transparency that can help quite a bit.'

'I think we need to start more direct conversations with our representatives and I think one of the best ways to do it is either to organize face to face, a call or a webinar to get some real questions answered. One thing I would like to hear from our government representatives is what are they going to do to reduce electricity costs for small businesses in our community. What I have heard is the principle of affordability and competitiveness will really ensure cost savings can be realised either directly either through incentives and rebates, or indirectly through a lower system-wide cost. That is the type of conversation we need to start to have and foster with our government representatives and I just don't think that is there.'