

College, businesses eye Old Library for "Fab Lab"

By Brock Weir

Aurora could soon be an ?innovation incubator?, if the Town, Region, local educators ? and potentially manufacturers and biotech engineers ? get their way.

Representatives from Aurora, the Region of York and Seneca College will be meeting this week to discuss the possibility of building a ?FabLab? (fabrication laboratory) in the heart of Aurora. The project, according to organizers, would be a hub for offering local businesses, students and inventors ?the opportunity to develop and incubate new products and skills locally.?

Promoters of the plan, including representatives from the Town and schools such as Seneca College, have been meeting over the first half of the year to look at the possibilities of creating such a FabLab in Aurora.

Seneca College, according to Anthony Ierullo, Aurora's Manager of Long Range and Strategic Planning, has shown an interest in operating a Fab Lab in Town to support their existing operations and programs, but also to ?support local training and business development requirements.?

?Senior leaders from York Region, the Town of Aurora, and Seneca College met on May 17 to discuss the general parameters of a potential partnership and associated next steps,? said Mr. Ierullo. ?All parties involved agreed that we would continue to collaborate to close some of those gaps and continue answering some of those questions. The Region and the Town is collaborating on a business case to flesh those ideas out and Seneca is moving forward with producing some documents related to some funding opportunities.?

He added that all parties are moving quickly to submit letters of intent supporting the facility in order to take advantage of funding opportunities, applications for which would be due by the end of this month, that could come Seneca's way to make it a reality. A ?clearer picture?, he said, will be coming back to Council this fall recommending a path forward.

?I think the fact Seneca has signed off on the report and authorised them being named publically as a potential partner is a positive sign,? he said. ?This has been approved very high up in the chain and the Region is certainly with us and committed to bringing something like this to the Region itself.?

Mr. Ieurullo presented his findings to business leaders last week. They voiced their support of the idea, saying it would be a ?big opportunity? to attract manufacturers and biotech engineers to the area. Having such specialized programs close to home, they said, would do nothing but increase the number of trained professionals ? trained in a variety of skills ? in the area.

?We're trying to create a facility that is complementary to the incubator Southlake is putting together,? said Mr. Ieurullo. ?These companies may be European based and, if they come here and send in a couple of people here to launch into this market and hit a design snag, it may bring a partnership with someone in this facility instead of sending it back to home base in Europe.?

Getting support from the Town, the Region, and Seneca may be the easy part, but the real test will be to gauge the interest of manufacturers and engineers and convince them of the value of such a facility.

?That is the next step that will really make or break the project, but it is exciting to be able to explore the possibility,? said Councillor Michael Thompson.

Mr. Ierullo noted that there has been some interest expressed by manufacturers in Markham who initially explored the possibility of a lab there, and feelers have been sent to companies in the automotive, biotech, and general manufacturing industries.

Location for a Fab Lab too might be a challenge. After looking at various industrial buildings around Town, proponents of the plan,

have come to the conclusion that the old Aurora Public Library building on Victoria Street will be the best building for the job. They say it has ready access to public transit, could add to the revitalization of the Downtown Core, and provide good 'synergies' with surrounding organizations including the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Aurora Public Library, and even St. Andrew's College. Also in its favour? Size, reinforced floors, higher ceilings and office plans.

The future of the building is up for consideration by Councillors this week. They will be reviewing options brought forward by Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, both calling for the building's demolition. The first option would be to demolish the Old Library, and the adjacent building, formerly the Aurora Seniors' Centre and now home to Blue Balloon, to be replaced with a new multi-use community facility.

The second option is to demolish the two and build a parking lot and 'urban square', which would provide 67 parking spaces for the Library, Cultural Centre, and surrounding uses.

'That square is coveted by a number of different organizations,' said Councillor Michael Thompson at last week's meeting of the Economic Development Advisory Committee. 'We have to arm wrestle some of the senior members of the Town of Aurora because different ideas are being proposed for that space and this needs to be considered as one of those ideas.'