

Colorado town inspires downtown revitalization ideas for Mayor

September's opening of Aurora Town Square and the dedication of the new Aurora United Church building next year are just two examples of projects that will draw new people into the downtown core.

But further measures on how historic downtowns like Aurora can continue to serve the community well could be brought forward following a recent trip to Arvada, Colorado by Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas and Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Iain Lovatt.

In June, municipal representatives from across Canada – including several members of Aurora Council – descended on Calgary, AB, for the annual Federation of Canadian Municipalities Conference.

Held from June 6 – 9, the conference afforded Mayor Mrakas to join in a side trip planned by Mayor Lovatt to meet Arvada Mayor Lauren Simpson, to see what the American city of nearly 125,000 people is doing to keep their Olde Town Arvada historic district the community's beating heart.

“Mayor Lovatt sent me a couple of articles that speak to what they've done with Old Towne Arvada,” said Mayor Mrakas, noting their efforts have seen the city receive several awards. “There was quite a lot that we learned. We saw a lot of things they were able to accomplish where the area was a kind of similar to a lot of smaller urban areas where the towns have lost their way and become a little bit more vacant or empty. With some vacant properties they were able to transform [them] by really encouraging and building up their community gathering space, adding events to the area.”

Arts and culture, he notes, was a “big theme” through Arvada's revitalization efforts, along with protecting heritage.

“Not just protecting, but how they took the redevelopment in the area and actually continued to keep the character of the Olde Town feel,” he says. “A lot of the buildings that were built and redeveloped actually have a historic look to them, so when you move from one area to the other within the Olde Town, it's really tough to recognize the new from the old.”

“Talking to the Mayor, she specifically said that one of the keys to revitalizing an older area, a downtown, in these small urban settings is definitely creating – and, in our case, a Town Square – a gathering place that people can come to and come together and enjoy, whether it is events, whether it is just each other's company, and also? it really helps spur that economic development in those areas as well. It's through the creation of those gathering places and events we see more and more businesses that come in and they created an Urban Renewal Authority which is arm's length from Council itself? similar to our Economic Development Corporation where it's arm's length from Council.”

These initiatives are done in collaboration with their local Business Improvement Association (BIA) to look at what businesses come into the area and how they can promote more “unique” businesses, restaurants, bars, and “a really unique blend of different types of businesses that really encourage the area to become a [place] people want to visit on a regular basis because they want to be down there for all the unique things that are there.”

Their Urban Renewal Authority had seed funding to buy “key properties” in the downtown area which were redeveloped to spur revitalization, many of which were “sitting derelict for a long period of time and were now becoming a useful part of the revitalization of the downtown area.”

“I think that all the things that we talked about and learned about for Arvada, there are many things we can incorporate as we continue the revitalization for our downtown,” said Mayor Mrakas. “I believe we're on the right track and I did show the Mayor of Arvada some of our renderings and the current pictures of where we're at with the Square and what we're doing, she was pretty excited and also wanted to learn more about what we're doing.”

“It's a phenomenal project that so many smaller municipalities need to do to see their downtowns revitalized and become that really

special place that people in the community gather. I think we're going to take a lot of the things we learned, we're going to be moving forward as we continue to get closer to the grand opening of Town Square, looking at whether it is through creating a community permit plan for the downtown area and creating that vision with the help of our residents, business owners and the property owners in the area, and a conceptual plan on how we move forward and how that ultimate vision and goal that this is what our downtown Aurora will look like by 2035.?

By Brock Weir