

Community Improvement Plan draft targets tax breaks and relief

By Brock Weir

Tax breaks, relief, and support to help you spruce up properties could all be part of Aurora's new Community Improvement Plan (CIP).

Councillors will consider a multi-level plan later this year to provide tax relief, incentives, and other support as part of the CIP to foster, support, and improve businesses and commercial properties along Yonge and Wellington Streets.

Improving, stimulating, and redeveloping Aurora's Downtown Core has been debated for well over a decade, and the message received last week by Aurora's Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC) was if anything is to be done, some money needs to be put on the table.

"The development of a CIP for the Aurora Promenade is intended to complement a broader municipal planning initiative for sustainable growth management, economic development and community renewal in Town via the revitalization of Aurora's historic and urban landscape," said consultants from Sierra Planning and Management.

While separate plans for the Aurora Promenade have introduced concepts for uniformity for new buildings and consistent street furniture, all with an eye of making sure things are "walkable" for the community, last week's meeting focused on incentives Aurora can provide property owners to hold up their end of the bargain so Downtown Aurora is all it can be.

The first initiative is a grant program to help property owners improve and replace their facades and signage. The proposed program is limited to improvements and upgrades to street fronts, but in some cases, such as buildings on prominent corners, could also apply to multiple sides of the building.

It entails a matching grant of up to 50 per cent of costs up to a maximum grant of \$15,000.

"These meet the objectives" to enhance the aesthetic feel of downtown," said consultant Jonathon Hack. "Façade and signage grants, as long as they are well-funded, can have a good effect. This has to be an improvement to the whole look of the building. If [the applicant] goes and gets other public funds, you should have the right not to provide 50 per cent of those costs."

During the meeting, committee members questioned whether such programs should apply to businesses on streets shooting out from Wellington or Yonge Street such as Temperance. The consultants said it is going to be up to Council set the limits.

The second program considered was a "Building Restoration, Renovation and Improvement Program" which targets "enhanced use of second floors of commercial premises" and other improvements to buildings, preparing them for a new use.

The proposal includes a secured, interest-free maximum loan of \$40,000 per property. Conditions on such loans would be established by Council, but at its base is the objective to "promote the Town's oldest commercial building stock." Eligible costs would include things like building works itself, to labour and insurance.

Additional incentives to redevelop properties include a grant to reimburse development charges up to 75 per cent or \$100,000, whichever is less, for commercial development projects, and a Heritage Property Tax Relief Program which would provide up to 40 per cent relief in property taxes for heritage property owners.

"Aurora is unlike many communities in that you have a stock of heritage properties," said Mr. Hack. "I am less convinced about this program. You don't want to set a precedent that if you have heritage we'll reduce your taxes by 20 per cent. That could happen ad infinitum."

The proposed relief, however, would be limited to designated heritage properties and those in Heritage Conservation Districts, in which Aurora has one and one further in the works.

Mr. Hack stressed numbers outlined in the draft plan are strictly guidelines. Towns are loath to restrict themselves, he said.

“If you can provide a \$300,000 rolling fund, you could spend \$200,000 in year one and you'll have \$100,000 you can roll into the next year for a limited period of five years,” he said. “That is the amount of funding I think is realistic for this program.”

That \$300,000 rolling fund, pointed out Councillor Michael Thompson, could represent a 1 per cent tax increase on residents, if it is funded from operating funds. Nevertheless, consultants suggested it might be a worthwhile investment.

“You might find [up to] \$600,000 is generated in the applications themselves. Yes, you are putting the burden on some of the people who aren't going to be taking advantage of this, but the reason you're doing this in the first place is we believe a viable, functioning downtown is good for everyone's assessed value in terms of the growth of the community, let alone the services you get,” said Mr. Hack, noting that cases have shown that each municipal dollar in these programs have the potential to return more than threefold.

Added Mayor Geoffrey Dawe: “A rising tide floats all boats.”

Others at the meeting, including Councillor John Abel, suggested more was needed than simply sprucing up the streetscape.

“We have got to figure out a way of getting the community down there,” he said. “You can paint everything, but does that mean everyone is going to come?”