

Community Improvement Plan should be just one wheel in motion: Councillor

By Brock Weir

A Community Improvement Plan (CIP) could stimulate Downtown Aurora, but more consideration needs to be given for a plan with so much money potentially riding on it.

That is the message going into this week's Council meeting after Councillors took a first crack at a draft CIP. The CIP is a series of proposed measures using public money for initiatives to stimulate and improve Aurora's Downtown Core and, specifically, commercial development.

There is a need to support the longevity of existing building stock, which really is an older building stock, to enhance the aesthetic appeal of downtown, said Kim Wilmot, a consultant retained to develop the plan with a specific eye to the Yonge and Wellington corridors. The focus of the CIP is really on encouraging the commercial reuse of the heritage properties already existing downtown.

The plan was generally well received by Councillors last week, although questions remain on the logistics. For Councillor John Abel, it is one component of what should be a bigger picture for Downtown Aurora, including the Aurora Promenade plan and visions for Library Square.

All those pieces should be in motion, if not in place, before we get to something like this. It is going to cost a lot of money and this alone will not revitalize the Downtown, [although] it will certainly help.

It is an excellent tool and well thought-out, but in light of some of the other strategies that were brought forward, this is a package that is going to make this work and we have to see that.

As for Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, it will be a great step forward in giving a hand up to Downtown business and commercial property owners.

I think this is a great opportunity for us to show that we are interested in making sure we can do what we can to assist with the revitalization of downtown, and it gives businesses an opportunity to show they are also in the game, said Mayor Dawe on initiatives that will, in many cases, partner the Town with businesses in making these improvements.

I am pleased that we are moving forward with this and I look forward to the next step.

Through the CIP, property owners will have to make the first move before receiving any support from the plan. Such programs include a grant for Development Charges where property owners would get a break on the amount they have to pay for redevelopment downtown, tax breaks if redevelopment will boost a building's overall tax assessment value, and tax relief for heritage properties that have new leases on life as commercial properties.

Municipalities, according to Ms. Wilmot, receive the best bang for their buck, however through a façade and signage improvement program.

This has a significant impact in terms of the visual improvement on the Downtown, she said. It is focused on supporting existing commercial and commercial mixed use properties fronting Yonge and Wellington Street, what we feel to be the key commercial spine.

Such a program, if adopted, could see the Town commit to up to 50 per cent of eligible costs of façade and signage improvements up to a maximum of \$50,000, or whichever is less.

With each component of the program coming at a price, the consultants propose funding the CIP through a special reserve fund with

a minimum funding allocation of \$200,000, capped at a \$320,000 maximum. If adopted, applications from property owners are likely to fluctuate year to year. They also recommend a dedicated administrator for the program to "monitor and help implement" the CIP effectively, something Ms. Wilmot said has the potential to be "very intensive."

The CIP is expected to generate further discussion this week, before going back for fine tuning, and ultimate approval by Council at a later date. With so much money riding on this, however, Councillor Wendy Gaertner suggested something more should be done.

"Council needs to do a little more work on this just because there is so much money involved, and not just go through the [General Committee] and Council process," she said.