

Community Improvement Plan should look at Regional support: Council

By Brock Weir

If Aurora approves a new Community Improvement Plan (CIP) this week, Councillors don't want to have to go it alone.

Councillors approved the Community Improvement Plan at the Committee Level last week, a plan which will provide a series of financial incentives designed to provide a boost to Aurora's downtown core. Initiatives include a façade and signage improvement program to increase the visibility and attractiveness of area businesses, and tax and development charge deferrals for developers coming in to intensify current developments.

It also includes tax breaks for building owners renovating heritage buildings for commercial use.

If the committee's recommendations are approved at Council this week, Councillors will also direct staff to begin talks with the Region of York to participate and provide a degree of support in the CIP.

“We have said it enough that we see an opportunity to leverage the ability of the program if we can also get the Region to participate in it,” said Councillor Michael Thompson. “As more of the municipalities, especially [York Region's Northern Six (N6) municipalities] come online with CIP plans, I think there is an opportunity there for us, as a group to show the Region there is value in them doing this.”

Approval of the plan is also contingent on the upcoming approval of the 2014 budget.

Councillors have already approved \$220,000 to get the CIP plan started this year for the various programs included in the plan. This is the maximum, and although staff said they could not predict minimums, this seed funding is intended to be the start of a rolling fund that will continue through the year.

The plan received the support of the majority of Councillors last week who argued it will be a step forward for business revitalization.

From the perspective of Councillor Evelyn Buck, however, history has indicated this sentiment can be difficult to make a reality. Citing the failure of a past Business Improvement Plan which did not receive a substantial buy-in from local business owners, she said, “Once bitten, twice shy.”

“We didn't lose our commercial centre, it moved itself to the south end of Town,” said Councillor Buck on the past BIA. “There was considerable resentment from the businesses that were striving to be successful at the south end of town and having taxes imposed upon them to be used to the benefit of businesses in the centre of Town.

“I am thinking not of the property owners who would benefit, but I am thinking of the whole town. They have to pay taxes for services they are not receiving and I do not think they are in any way, despite going through this routine of public consultation, aware this Council is proposing to tax them to add \$200,000 this year. I commend Councillors for their optimism and their hopes, but you can't sell it to me.”

Other Councillors, however, rejected her comparison to a BIA. Councillor Chris Ballard, for instance said one had nothing to do with the other, adding the plan aims to be revenue neutral in grants, and loans would be offset by increases to property assessment.

“That's the hope,” said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning. “It's a building block in the revitalization of Downtown and through the improvements there will be increased assessment and value through our property taxes in the long term. I am sure we'll see improvements on the street. We will certainly see a change in our streetscape downtown and that is the goal. I think the municipality as a whole would reap the benefits.”

As far as building blocks go, this is one that would assist in revitalizing a specific portion of Downtown Aurora and, as such, are geared towards commercial developments and façade improvements, he added. It is for property owners to come forward and take advantage of the program, not for general maintenance but for improvements that will have a greater benefit to the surrounding area through streetscape and increased property values.

?I believe this is called planning for the future,? said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. ?[The consultant] said a dollar invested by the Town could drive anywhere between \$4 and \$6, so I think that is a pretty good return. The second [issue] is we don't come to the table until a business has ponied up [with their portion of the bill] so we're not left holding the bag.?

Based on the comments around the table, Councillor Thompson concluded that greater effort needs to be taken to communicate and market the CIP to the wider Aurora audience, particularly the funding, which could look towards more ?creative? avenues in the future.

?There might be future opportunities to leverage relationship with some of the commercial [investments] that will come into Aurora on a larger scale and see if they have an appetite to see or fund this program,? he said, referring to over \$100,000 of funding this year that will come from the Whitwell Donation, set up by Smart Centres when they brought Walmart to Aurora.

?Maybe we can approach it on a year by year basis, but I think there are other ways than always just looking for taxpayers to fund this to help them improve the downtown core.?