

Community Improvement Plan vision, limits questioned by Council

By Brock Weir

Whether you have been making pitches for improvements in Aurora's Downtown Core for decades, or turned on your stopwatch when Council formally retained consultants to do something about it, a Community Improvement Plan has been a long time coming, according to proponents.

But last week, when Councillors and members of the public alike had their first formal crack at the extensive plan to stimulate and rejuvenate Aurora's historic business core, the vision garnered markedly mixed reviews.

The Community Improvement Plan (CIP) is the result of extensive consultation with local business owners, residents in the Downtown Core, and politicians to develop a game plan to bring more people and redevelopment into the area.

The result is a series of grant programs and initiatives to stimulate redevelopment and improve the looks of the area. Such programs include a façade and signage improvement grant which would provide downtown businesses with up to \$15,000 towards exterior improvements to their property.

A Building Restoration, Renovation and Improvement Program would go towards providing a push for property owners to enhance their second floors, particularly in older businesses, for more commercial development. It would go towards funding expansions and additions and making sure it meets the grade from a health and safety perspective between \$15,000 and \$40,000.

A Development Charges Grant would provide property owners relief on DCs for redevelopment within the Yonge and Wellington Corridor, relief of up to 75 per cent of the Town's portion of Development Charges up to \$100,000.

Tax-based Redevelopment Grants would give some leverage for influxes of new taxes coming into Town coffers through a redevelopment project, while a Heritage Property Relief programs would encourage redevelopment of heritage homes for commercial or mixed uses.

The CIP area focuses primarily on the Yonge and Wellington corridor, running on Yonge from Valhalla Court to Dunning Avenue, and along Wellington from Harriman Road to Walton Drive, along with select side streets.

Running eastward toward just west of Berczy Street, however, some Councillors questioned a seemingly arbitrary cut off point, creating a situation where next door neighbours might find themselves on either side of the CIP divide.

‘I want to avoid any complications later on where we have one owner of a particular lot [wondering why they are not included] and we need to have a good rationale,’ said Councillor John Gallo.

This was a problem consultant Jonathan Hack of Sierra Planning said could be addressed, but it was bound to be an arbitrary decision no matter how they approach it.

‘I can't justify why we went one property in [from Berczy] and didn't go for another one,’ he said. ‘We had to cut the line off somewhere. Ultimately, at the end of the day, it is a council-public consideration as to how far you should take the boundaries. Some municipalities avoid the discussions and say the entire municipality within the urban plan area is designate as a CIP.’

But, as one expands the CIP area, so too expands the price tag.

This came through addressing concerns from Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said property owners at Golf Links Drive and Dunning Avenue were excited about the plan, as were property owners to the south. She questioned whether the CIP could be extended down to Edward Street.

“We are dealing with limited resources,” said Anthony Ierullo, Economic Development Manager for the Town of Aurora. “The plan itself has a number of programs that have focused on key redevelopment sites, central in Downtown, or smaller sites that can benefit from some renovations in making those sites more attractive in adding to the streetscape.”

Councillors also said they wanted safeguards to ensure that once this program is in motion, property owners benefiting from the initiatives don't take advantage of the program by flipping the properties and making a bundle in return.

“You want to make sure you are putting your funds into a stable relationship between a property owner and the Town,” said Mr. Hack. “If you have a delinquent property owner who takes advantage and then sells it to a better owner, maybe you have won out in that regard. The general proposition is if someone is receiving the grant, they are doing so because they are investing in the Town.

“This really is focused on leveraging the private sector [to] invest through the use of seed money from the public sector. If this plan was implemented, as I think everyone here would like, you get a ratio where every public dollar spent would get between \$4 - \$6 private sector dollars invested. If you do them properly, these things can be quite successful.”

Some of these plans, however, missed the mark, according to two members of the public appearing in the public session, including long-time trails advocate Klaus Wehrenberg.

Speaking of his “disappointment” with what he described as the “narrow scope” of the plan, he said more needs to be done than just sprucing up the area “including ensuring Downtown Aurora is a destination for people to come to.

“If you don't solve that, you're not going very far with these details,” he said. “Storefront improvements can go a little way, but we're not going anywhere in a big way.”