

Community is key in retaining business, says Mayor



By Brock Weir

Drawing in new and fostering existing businesses were in the spotlight last week as Mayor Geoff Dawe sat down with the Aurora Chamber of Commerce for a wide-ranging Question and Answer session last week.

The Q&A came following the Mayor's Annual Luncheon, hosted by the Chamber this year at Oakview Terrace in north Richmond Hill.

The event attracted a healthy crowd and a cross-section of the local business and political communities to hear the Mayor's vision for the year ahead.

Sitting down with Chamber chair Javed Khan, Mayor Dawe said the strongest draw for businesses coming into Aurora is 'the diversity of our community.'

'It is a very engaged community,' said Mayor Dawe. 'Most of the people who live here want to shop here as well, [so] there is that built-in driver.'

Current movement on Library Square and the development of a 'Cultural Precinct' in Aurora's Downtown Core will be a 'kick-starter' to renewed focus.

'We talked about downtown revitalization for years and we have always struggled with really defining what that means, and I think that is going to come out of that and be a major boost,' he said.

Mr. Khan steered conversation towards Aurora's Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) strategy, focusing on mounting commercial vacancies throughout Town, an issue the Chamber said they wanted further insight on ahead of last Wednesday's lunch.

'We don't want any businesses to fail,' said Mayor Dawe. 'Yonge Street is destination shopping. If you look at businesses that are successful on Yonge Street (Caruso's, Klein Home, Benjamin Moore, Fluffy Puppies) [show] you have to have an executable business plan. That is where I think we, along with the Chamber, can work more efficiently, more closely, more positively with individual businesses to say, 'Here are some of the services we can provide.'

'I have talked to a couple of landlords and there is no landlord who wants empty buildings. That is not why they are in business. [The ones] I have talked to are looking for quality tenants. They don't want turnover in their buildings and, quite frankly, it can take longer to get that quality tenant. I think what we have to do with the Chamber is focus on getting destination businesses, especially [on Yonge from] Wellington down to Church Street.'

A key driver in achieving this, he noted, is the formation of a new Economic Development Board, which will soon come up for Council approval once the terms of reference are reviewed by Aurora's existing Economic Development Advisory Committee. Over the years, the Mayor, the Chamber, and the Committee have put considerable focus on a new hotel for Aurora as well as coming up with a solution to address some of the problems stemming from the former Howard Johnson's on Yonge Street, which sits boarded up.

While the announcement of a hotel in northeast Aurora stole some of Mayor Dawe's thunder as far as his speech was concerned, he did share some news on Howard Johnson's.

?There are some steps we're looking at pursuing that I am not at liberty to speak to at this point,? said Mayor Dawe, responding to Mr. Khan's question on what Aurora plans to do about that ?eyesore.?
?We have put a number of people in touch with the owner of that property and he has an unrealistic sales figure,? continued Mayor Dawe, noting the last figure he did hear was \$12 million. ?So, we're just looking at some options. The Town does go through there on a regular basis and I think they were just in there because there were some people squatting and we are doing what we can.?