

Consumer confidence and cannabis top questions for Mayor at Chamber event

Now that York Region is out of lockdown and back into the Red (Control) Zone of the Province's plan to combat the spread of COVID-19, consumer confidence will be key to making businesses thrive once again.

Bolstering this confidence was one of the topics tackled by Mayor Tom Mrakas last Wednesday following his annual State of the Town address to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Pre-recorded in Council Chambers and streamed to audiences over YouTube and Facebook, the Mayor sat down with Sandra Ferri, President of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, for a Q&A session featuring a selection of questions generated by Chamber members.

"Consumers have spent a great deal of time ordering online and avoiding in-person shopping throughout the pandemic," said Ms. Ferri. "What will you as Mayor, and the Town, do to instill confidence in our local businesses as the economy starts to re-open?"

Mayor Mrakas tackled this question in a two-prong approach, answering that question with one of his own: "Is it safe from a health and safety perspective?"

"There are a number of moving parts in order for this to happen," he replied. "Most especially, the Province and the Federal Government have to get everyone vaccinated to relieve the stress of the pandemic. We need to remind people to follow all the safety protocols and we need to ensure that our stores, retail, restaurants, manufacturing, industrial, are following the safety protocols. This will instill confidence in our local businesses.

"The Town can't instill consumer confidence and trust in our local businesses; that is the job of the retailers, of all our businesses, and those that do will benefit. All we can do as a Town is continue to encourage people to shop local and remind people of the safety protocols in place. We will continue to work with our local partners to instill that consumer confidence and encourage people to shop local and help re-start our local economy. I am confident in the creativity and determination of our local entrepreneurs to adapt and thrive post-pandemic."

Entrepreneurship was the order of the day when the Mayor fielded a question related to the proliferation of cannabis stores in Aurora.

Aurora is just one of two York Region municipalities, Whitchurch-Stouffville being the other, to opt in for retail cannabis sales, several applications have come forward to establish these stores, with some already open to customers including Jane's Cannabis Shop at Wellington Street East and Industrial Parkway North, and Alpha Cannabis, just a stone's throw west on Wellington.

"As one of only two York Region municipalities that opted in to allow marijuana retail stores, are you concerned about what impact the growing number of cannabis retail stores opening up will have on our business community and the community at large?"

There might be a "stigma" surrounding cannabis, said Mayor Mrakas, and this, in turn, gives a "false perception" about the stores themselves.

"While Aurora is an opt-in municipality, we have seen that the stores are operated by entrepreneurs that are following the guidelines set out by the Province and our internal teams are monitoring the applications as they come through. We always talk about economic stimulus and these legal stores offer a solid tax benefit and we see no real community disruption, which is very similar to the LCBO. When you look at these purchases, they are not impulse purchases. People will still buy, and they might as well buy from an Aurora-based business, right?"

But Aurora-based businesses are often locating elsewhere than what has historically been the case.

The Yonge Street core has a number of vacant storefronts and, as Ms. Ferri underscored, when the Yonge Street, Wellington Street and Bayview corridors are looked at as three parts of a whole, there are over 65 storefronts that are for lease or sale.

‘This number [has grown] over recent months,’ said Ms. Ferri. ‘Only four months ago, there were 35 along Yonge Street alone. What actions will the Town be proposing to bring back some of these services and businesses and support the small entrepreneur to stay in Aurora?’

In response, the Mayor outlined a number of investments that have been made in the downtown core, along with work carried out by the Chamber, the Town's Economic Development Corporation, and the Downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA).

‘We are all collaborating on going forward with our plans,’ he said. ‘Our investment in the Promenade, Library Square specifically, we're trying to make it a Regional destination. That, and in continuing to offer supports through the York Small Business Enterprise Centre, continuing to ensure our local businesses are all aware of the Federal and Provincial funding supports, sharing that information, those are the types of things we're doing as a Town.’

‘When you do look at the private investments that are occurring in the downtown right now and you see what is happening, I encourage everyone to take a drive down Yonge Street. Go from the south all the way from the north end and you will see why there is so much excitement, why we see the possibilities over the next year of what is going to transpire from economic growth. You see the private investments occurring and it is all positive change. I think we're all excited about it and those are the kinds of things we're doing to work together to ensure the Downtown Core becomes a destination for all.’

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter