

Council sets "aggressive" target for Cultural Precinct vision

By Brock Weir

After collecting dust as a concept in local plans for years, Aurora has now set an 'aggressive' target in setting a vision to make the Town's proposed 'Cultural Precinct' a reality.

Council last week voted to award a nearly \$59,000 contract to Fotenn Consultants to develop a concrete vision for the precinct, which is planned to be a cultural hub in Aurora's Downtown Core, extending from Town Park and the Aurora Armoury in the east, westward to Yonge Street, encompassing several churches and cultural institutions, including the Aurora Public Library and the Aurora Cultural Centre.

It is proposed to be a cornerstone of the revitalization of Aurora's Downtown.

Despite some reservations around the table last week, Council approved the contract 8 ? 0. Councillor Wendy Gaertner was not present at the meeting.

Among those with concerns moving forward with the plan was Councillor John Abel, who questioned the speed in which this was moving forward, not just the aggressive completion target of November 30 of this year, but coming to Council as an add-on item just hours before last week's meeting was set to commence.

'I heard last term it is tough for Council to digest and the public to understand when we have a report dropped upon us at the hour we go into Council for these discussions,' he said. 'My concern when we have a report dropped upon us at the hour we go into Council for these discussions' is basically the lack of public awareness.'

Questioning whether the matter was time sensitive and could be deferred until a later meeting to take in any potential comments from the public, Councillor Abel was told it was necessary to move forward now given the fall target.

'If it gets approved this evening and dealt with, this will provide additional time for the consultant as well as the public to participate in the process,' said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation. 'As you know, Council has given direction that this entire project be completed by November 30 so that the consultant is working towards that deadline.'

'The end result we would like to see provided to Council is a vision for a cultural precinct. We want the consultant to provide options to Council with regards to how this particular cultural precinct could develop and proceed in providing cultural services and opportunities for public and private partnerships within this culture.'

A consultation session with stakeholders is slated for October 8, Mr. Downey added, which will provide the public with their first formal opportunity sound off with the consultant and express any options, objections and opportunities to be had in the area in question. A 'visioning report' will follow and consultants are hoping to have something to present to Council by October 27.

If all goes according to plan, and the final conceptual plan is approved November 30, it will come up for final Council adoption by December 8.

For other Councillors, however, this was hardly a rush and moving forward with something here is long overdue.

'It goes all the way back to the Aurora Promenade plan that was adopted by Council in 2010,' said Councillor Michael Thompson who, along with Councillor Tom Mrakas, floated the idea earlier in the summer of retaining a consultant to hammer out this vision. 'It was identified then, both from a geographical perspective in terms of the area itself, as well as being one of the key objectives in terms of the quick wins identified in the promenade. At this point, it might seem that we are moving quickly [but this is a] key initiative in the revitalization of the Downtown has been on the books since 2010. That came out of multiple community consultations, consultants' plans, and so forth.'

Added Councillor Harold Kim: ?Normally I am not a big proponent of consultants, especially when consultants are used in the same type of project over a series of years. This is not something new, and sometimes it takes several years for an idea or vision to absorb into people's psyche and the feeling of comfort around it whether you are buying a new house or you're renovating your basement. Sometimes people want to move quickly. I feel in the last several weeks in discussing this, there is a political will and desire to take.?