

Cultural blueprint to include arts, heritage and sport

By Brock Weir

Few would dispute hockey and lacrosse being an indelible part of the Canadian fabric, but can sport also be culture?

That is a question currently being grappled with by Council as they take the next step in establishing a Cultural Master Plan for Aurora.

Council approved drafting a Cultural Master Plan, a plan which would bring together groups such as the Aurora Public Library, Aurora Cultural Centre, Theatre Aurora, Aurora Historical Society (AHS), and a host of the usual suspects, to form an overall playbook for the Town's cultural service providers, earlier this year.

This week, they will be asked to take the next step in forming an ad-hoc group to steer it the rest of the way. Town staff have proposed a new working group to look at ways to deliver and foster culture within Aurora comprised of various Town departments as well as the Cultural Centre, Aurora Chamber of Commerce, Theatre Aurora, AHS, Sport Aurora, the York Region Arts Council, and the Aurora Public Library Board.

The terms of reference call on the group to 'cater to a wide range of cultural pursuits and places', including visual, performance, literary, and public arts; cultural heritage; festivals and traditions; music; media arts; traditional crafts; business and tourism; and education, among others.

While Councillors had different suggestions of which local groups could and should be represented within the ad-hoc committee, including a greater Council representation, Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation, said consultants retained to draft the plan wanted to keep membership to a minimum.

Of the proposed membership, however, the inclusion of Sport Aurora raised the most eyebrows.

The alarm bells were first raised by Councillors Evelyn Buck and John Gallo. While the former said sport had no place in a Cultural Plan, the latter said sport indeed had a place, but sport in Aurora is not best represented by Sport Aurora.

Councillor Gallo's argument was although Sport Aurora represented a wide-range of sports, they did not include reps from Aurora Youth Soccer or Aurora Minor Hockey, Aurora's two largest, and fastest growing, sporting groups.

'That is significant to me,' he said, before seconding an amendment floated by Councillor Buck to remove Sport Aurora from the roster altogether.

Similar views were expressed by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said she believed the number of groups participating in the ad-hoc committee was simply too large. Sporting groups, for instance, should be encouraged to provide input to the committee before their final recommendations come to Council rather than participating on the committee itself, she argued.

'I just don't think it is right to put one group that represents not all of the sports [groups] on our committee,' she said.

First speaking against the move was Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. He said Council should not exclude Sport Aurora simply because there are some groups outside of its jurisdiction any more than soccer or hockey should be excluded because they're not affiliated with Sport Aurora.

'Sport represents a huge element of the culture of this town,' argued Mayor Dawe. 'Culture is a very wide-ranging definition and they are one group who are well-organized and I agree that they do not represent everyone, but they certainly represent a wide range of bodies of sport disciplines.'

Sport plays a 'critical role' in developing the 'cultural and social fabric of any community', added Mr. Downey when questioned by Councillor Michael Thompson on why they were included in the first place. It is important for sport to be included, and Sport Aurora has a number of contacts throughout the sporting community. Including them in the group does not mean that soccer and hockey would go unrepresented and he said they would be able to participate in 'stakeholder meetings and discussions with assisting us and making recommendations on the Cultural Master Plan.

'I certainly believe we would benefit from representatives from Sport Aurora and their views on what role sport plays in the development of culture within the community,' Mr. Downey concluded.

The issue continued to divide Council and ultimately Councillor Buck's motion was defeated. The recommendation moves ahead this week as-is, and the arguments could well continue.

Once the ad-hoc group is approved, they will host a number of stakeholder meetings to devise the plan which will be open to the public, said Mr. Downey. This will also provide any members of the public the opportunity to provide suggestions and direction to make sure consultants ensure all concerns of individuals and groups are addressed.

'We're not excluding anybody,' said Mr. Downey. 'We have to pick a group.'

What do you think? Does Aurora's culture include sport? Send your thoughts to letters@auroran.com.