

Cultural groups call for action on Master Plan

By Brock Weir

Master Plans are intended to be living documents, a blueprint charting the way forward that can also change and evolve over time along with the community.

But, according to many groups in Aurora who deliver a variety of cultural services to the community, Aurora's Cultural Master Plan, which was intended to guide the development of cultural initiatives from between 2014 and 2019 has barely left the starting post. In fact, some of the community's cultural partners didn't even know the Plan existed.

That was a key finding in a report before Council stemming from roundtable and individual interviews and workshops that brought many of these key players together to identify strengths and weaknesses of existing cultural partnerships? that is, cultural groups in the community that receive municipal contributions? and to gain an understanding of what cultural partners would like to see from this Town moving forward.?

The findings show that the next Council will have its work cut out for them in bridging some of these gaps.

Participating organizations included the Aurora Public Library, Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Historical Society, Aurora Seniors' Centre, Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, the Pine Tree Potters Guild, Society of York Region Artists (SOYRA), Theatre Aurora, and the Aurora Farmers' Market.

Many of these groups came together for a further workshop this past June facilitated by consultant Interkom.

The workshop agenda focused on stakeholder consultation,? said Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services for the Town of Aurora. Each participating partner group was asked to speak about their needs, challenges and expectations from the Town. Key findings from these discussions include: most organizations were not familiar with the Cultural Master Plan; little has been accomplished since completion of the Plan in May 2014; communication between cultural partners and the Town remains problematic as there are few staff resources dedicated to culture; [and] lack of awareness and consideration of economic impact as a driver of success in the cultural arts.?

The roundtable came up with three key priorities going forward, and these included the development of a marketing strategy specifically for the cultural sector, improved signage and wayfinding around town, and highlighting cultural destinations for the purposes of tourism.

Taking a closer look at the Town's interaction with its cultural partners? stemmed from a motion made two years ago from Councillor Harold Kim. The purpose of the initial motion was to establish more predictable municipal funding for partners like the Aurora Cultural Centre and Aurora Historical Society rather than having each group come and make a pitch to Council during each year's budget consultation.

I thought this is not the right way for any organization to make long-term planning when they are really just going year to year on the budget requests,? said Councillor Harold Kim on the new report. What was stark for me when reading the report was the lack of awareness of a Cultural Master Plan. I think the larger partners are aware; they may not be acutely aware, but they are aware it exists and are somewhat familiar with it, but the smaller partners mentioned were not. I think this is a great first step to get everyone on board and on-side with our Cultural Master Plan. The fact the last Cultural Plan was made in 2014 certainly deems it necessary in the next term as a new Plan is built in partnership with the identified cultural partners.?

Councillor Kim added he was also struck by the report's finding that some cultural groups were not aware of economic drivers within their sector, and questioned whether or not it was a lack of awareness over how their resources are used, or a lack of understanding how big an economic impact they could potentially have on the community.

There is a lot of information even in the Master Plan that speaks to the cultural assets and functions of culture in the community that have a positive economic impact, but getting to the root of each of our partners and beyond as to what that actually looks like, I think that would be a valuable analysis,? said Ms. McDougall.

As much as there is a sport influence and an obvious economic impact with tournaments and when things come to Town, I think it is just as important to [look at] the cultural impact these opportunities can have.?

Looking ahead to future funding, Councillor Kim said key performance indicators (KPIs) are essential in indicating whether each organization is delivering on its cultural promise? and removes Council from a step of the process where decisions are based on emotion? rather than the numbers.

I think the next step will go into more detail on what those KPIs would be working with each cultural partner,? he said. That first step would be removing Council from that first step of the funding project. I think having their own strategic plan in alignment with

the Town's Cultural Strategic Plan is also key because?that's what we're looking at here: a pyramid where everyone is aligned with the main trunk of the Master Plan. This is a great first step.?