

Cultural Master Plan might take longer than planned

By Brock Weir

What was originally viewed as a six month plan to strategize and coordinate all the components that make up Aurora's cultural sector might now take a little longer to come into being after Councillors expressed scepticism over the proposed timeframe.

This Tuesday, Council is set to approve terms of reference for the Cultural Master Plan, a plan which, when completed, could be the guiding force in how Aurora handles its culture and works with bodies such as the Aurora's Cultural Centre, Historical Society and Public Library. The plan will not be limited to these public bodies, however, and will provide guiding principles on a number of issues including public art, performing arts, built and natural cultural heritage, community events and festivals, traditions, media, tourism, and multiculturalism.

When completed, goals hoped to be achieved by the plan include increasing awareness of 'cultural assets' throughout the Town, 'stimulate community pride', earmark investment opportunities in the cultural sector, and look at enhancement of local culture.

The plan to bring this to fruition included public consultation, consultation with the stakeholders and questions, a cultural precinct plan for the Library Square area, and funding possibilities with a six month deadline. For some Councillors, however, that was setting the process up for a fall.

'I have a real concern we are rushing this,' said Councillor Chris Ballard. 'Six months to get it done? Most reports this Town has done, whether it is heritage or business planning or strategic planning, it is a good 12 month cycle and I can see that we would want to cut it back a bit, but I am really concerned this will get done in six months.'

Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said he didn't disagree that what was before Council was a 'somewhat accelerated process' but his department was concerned with moving it forward in a timely manner.

'If we extend past the budget cycle or the end of the year, then that won't happen and our concern is we're asking the consultants to accelerate the process to ensure that not only can this Council get an opportunity to approve this master plan, but also move it forward through budget discussions in 2014,' said Mr. Downey.

Concerns over the timing were also raised by Councillor Sandra Humfries. She too said it was an 'aggressive' plan, but the results would be 'critical' to the future of the Town as 'it touches upon all things and geographical changes.'

Council ultimately voted to make the plan to hire consultants to do the work more open-ended time-wise, with points being awarded accordingly in this criterion.

Mayor Geoffrey Dawe recalled the length it took for the Town to have a Master Parks and Recreation Plan in place and Mr. Downey conceded he would indeed prefer a longer window to get the plan done. Part of the previous evaluation model, he said, was how consultants could conform to the work schedule as outlined and agreed to the constraint being lifted.

Others, although not overly concerned about the time as such, expressed worry about how this timing would fall in the calendar. 'I agree that this isn't a long enough consulting period because it falls over the summer months when most of the consultation would have been done over the summer,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'As Councillor Buck has said, consulting with Aurorans over the summer is a useless process, so I would like to see this extended out.'

Councillor Thompson agreed that more discussion within the community was ideal, possibly looking for 'sustainability and synergy' amongst Aurora's cultural institutions, but the costs of what shakes down in the finished Cultural Master Plan need to be carefully watched.

?I have seen these types of documents and [they] will inevitably say 'spend more money on culture' and they keep asking for more funds, whether it be for culture, or museums, or whatever and the reality is 'these funds are limited,' he said. 'I am hoping to get out of the master plan some discussions around the funding models, the sustainability, especially given that there are a limited amount of resources and how best to utilize those dollars so that those institutions are sustainable. I would like to see more emphasis placed on the opportunities to coordinate cultural assets, as well as guiding approaches for funding models.'