

Cultural Plan focuses on collaboration and bridging gaps in Aurora

By Brock Weir

Aurora might have cultural institutions scattered throughout the Town, but one thing it does not have is a plan to bring everything together with common goals and vision.

That, however, changed this week as Council formally endorsed the long-gestating Cultural Master Plan.

The Plan has been in the works for the past year and charts a number of initiatives to be put in place from advertising and promotional strategies, to tourism plans, to make Aurora's culture work for the Town, and for each other.

After being given the green light, the next steps will include bringing forward a 'cultural mapping' project which would then pin down some of the fine details of costs related to the many endeavours on the plan.

For many sitting around the Council table it was a step that was long overdue.

'This solidifies some of the ideas we have discussed over the last several years,' said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. 'It doesn't nail anyone down to anything in particular. It just allows the municipality to support the plan at a high level [that we] want to see grow.'

Councillor John Abel also voiced his support of the plan, stating that it would foster using Aurora's cultural assets to attract new businesses and create 'inclusiveness' to newer parts of Aurora.

'If we just bring in one business, it pays for this endeavour so many times over,' said Councillor Abel. 'It enriches the attractiveness of our community, it speaks very much of what direction Aurora is going, and that [we're unique and have] a lot to offer.'

The Cultural Master Plan also serves to unite many of Aurora's cultural 'assets' and organizations where before they often operated on their own, argued Councillor Michael Thompson. He said having a common framework would be helpful in knowing where investments should be made.

Clarity on costs, however, would be key to going forward, in having a clear picture where all of Aurora's tax dollars are going, and have been going, into the complete cultural tapestry.

'I think when this comes before us at budget time, there needs to be that whole approach to it in terms of what we are spending on cultural assets as a complete balloon and we can make those clear and understanding decisions to our investment in this community and it needs to be done [in the fiscally responsible way] this plan speaks to,' he said. 'We need to make those choices to ensure that there is value for the rest of us.'

Some Councillors, on the other hand, wanted those dollars and cents pinned down before they could go onto the next step. Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, told Councillors that the steering committee thought it was important for Council to see the recommendations as they were, with dollar figures to come when Council decides which of the initiatives they might want to explore implementing further.

'We felt it was premature because we didn't want Council to feel they were obligated to provide X number of dollars to move forward these recommendations,' said Mr. Downey.

This was a missing piece of information Councillor Wendy Gaertner said gave her some pause.

'I am in support of the Cultural Master Plan, I think the committee has done amazing work, but I would like to know what the financial responsibilities would be, how much we have to spend extra in admin and exactly what the financial responsibilities of the

Town would be," she said. "It is long overdue [but] I can't endorse a plan until I know what we might be spending."

Also hesitating on the plan was Councillor Evelyn Buck. She said she would not be able to endorse it because it would be interfering with cultural organizations like Theatre Aurora that have grown and evolved on their own with minimal assistance from the Town. Although she said she appreciated the committee for "putting their heart and soul" into it, she "regretted" not being able to get behind it.

"My concern is I am very much aware of the richness of the cultural scene in Aurora and how it has been for the past 50 years," she said. "I am concerned that if the municipality gets involved in it, because it has been so healthy and vigorous, I think the independence of the various groups that have initiated programs and kept them going will be affected by a municipal corporate plan. I hesitate to endorse bureaucratic oversight."

While Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said he agreed with the concept of no additional bureaucracy to the private sector, he cited the recent economic downturn being more impactful beyond Canada as being due to "regulations properly implemented."

"I don't think we are looking at trying to regulate the cultural industry or the cultural view," he said. "I see this as a document that set up how we work with these groups in partnership. We do support Theatre Aurora, we do support the Cultural Centre, we do support the museum and we support these already."

"Let's make sure we are supporting them in a manner which is most fitting of our town."