

Cultural Precinct is 'leadership opportunity' for Cultural Centre: Executive Director

By Brock Weir

A conversation will need to be had in Aurora on just what is possible in helping the Town realise its cultural potential, according to Suzanne Haines, the Aurora Cultural Centre's newly minted Executive Director.

With Council set to resume talks on the future of Library Square and Aurora's Cultural Precinct this fall with the only certainty being the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre will be demolished, there are many opportunities to explore and the Aurora Cultural Centre is in the thick of it.

In the many proposals and visions that have come forward on what to replace the two buildings with, options have included extensions of existing buildings surrounding the site, including an expansion of the Church Street School to allow more space for services.

'When I looked at the Cultural master Plan and the Cultural Precinct, and [examining] those opportunities of how Town Council was talking about culture, it looked like a leadership opportunity,' says Ms. Haines. 'We certainly don't have a lot of purpose-built space in this community, so it would be fantastic to have arts space that is actually purpose-built and provides an opportunity for the community.'

When Ms. Haines joined the Cultural Centre in June, she says many ideas immediately began 'running around' in her head and it was hard to resist diving right in. There are, after all, certain constraints within the heritage building, not the least of which is a finite amount of space.

'Working with my staff and trying to determine where there might be space to add is the first step and where we have opportunities within the community to add as well,' she says. 'The facility itself is quite occupied and busy, which is great - a product of their success - and we need other people and other partners and sponsors to come on board if we're going to be able to grow the organization and add programming and opportunities.'

Brevik Hall, the expansive second floor facility which is typically used as a performing arts space, is but one example of significant potential. Designed as a multiuse facility, it definitely lives up to that vision, hosting not only the performing arts, but large scale meetings, corporate hires, and other rentals.

'Within the space, we can use every nook and cranny,' says Ms. Haines. 'I have had a lot of experience doing that, activating as much as possible and keeping our doors open as much as possible. It takes some money, it takes some time, but there is innovation and creativity. Luckily, I have creative people on board and an incredible staff, many of whom have been here since the beginning. There is a real innate knowledge of what has been tried, what has been successful, and what the community wants to see in this space.'

But, there needs to be a talk on 'What is possible and what can be supported in the community,' she adds, noting it is not just organizations like the Aurora Cultural Centre and Theatre Aurora, to pick but one example, that need to do the talking, but those who 'want to interact with culture.'

'Certainly it was exciting to me when I looked at the job and thought this is a place that is looking to grow and really have an impact on the community in a cultural way,' she says. 'There are studies upon studies that show arts and culture drives economic development and absolutely changes how people think about their communities and how they feel about where they live.'

'Like many communities, Aurora is one that has a number of different types of people - people who live here and stay here, people who go to work somewhere else and only live here at night, or people like me who come here to work and be here during the day. They need to have this cultural touch point because it makes their lives richer.'

'How do we tailor our programming to make sure that we're meeting those needs? There is certainly some excitement around the leadership that has been shown through the documentation I have looked at and the process the Town is going through. I am looking forward to being part of that conversation on growth. There are lots of opportunities for growth and partnership. My door is always open and the space is open for people to come and enjoy.'