

Cultural Precinct plan set for "Reboot"



By Brock Weir

Amid a sea of confusion and contention around the community, Aurora Council is set to hit the reset button on developing the Town's Cultural Precinct.

Since Council approved moving forward with developing a draft plan to transform the Town's Downtown Core into a revitalized destination focusing on three key downtown quadrants, the process has been mired in confusion and outcry from the surrounding community and indeed lawmakers.

According to Doug Nadorozny, Aurora's new CAO, it is time to 'reboot' the project to make sure everyone is on the same page.

As such, the development of the Cultural Precinct Plan will be taken out of the realm of the Parks and Recreation Department and treated as a planning exercise, Mr. Nadorozny said.

'It didn't take me long from the time I arrived here to figure out this has been a very interesting process for Council, for staff, and for the community,' he said at a meeting Thursday night for downtown ratepayers, Town Park Area Residents.

Since its inception, two processes have been working in parallel - the Cultural Precinct Plan, as well as a study into the repurposing of several municipal facilities including Victoria Hall, Town Park, and Petch House. Now is the time, he said, to bring those two projects together.

'We reached a stage in the Cultural Precinct plan where we moved from what was defined as the implementation phase, and that is where things started to get confusing because your interpretation of 'implementation' can mean many things. I know from the comments and the stress that occurred that many people thought the implementation was going to be sometime soon. That was never the intent. In fact, I would call it a poor choice of words.

'It was the implementation of the next piece of the Cultural Plan. It was already out there and perceptions started to be created and [by then] we were already operating at a deficit.'

Mr. Nadorozny recognized there was an 'overriding' concern from some groups that consultation into the Plan did not go far enough - whether it could have been wider, clarified, and better publicized.

As he dug deeper into the situation, he said he began to see that the two studies moving in parallel lines wasn't going to work.

'What I started saying to Councillors and staff on a one-on-one basis was I felt this process needed a reboot,' he said. 'I suggested we pause, refocus, look at everything we need to achieve it and put it into a different process and bring some order to it. We need to clarify the process to be followed and the timelines that were realistic in order to make sure both timelines and what we were trying to achieve was consistent with Council's [and the community's] objectives.'

'I also felt there was a need to move this from a Parks and Rec project, which is kind of what it became when you use words like 'implementation.' You get the sense we are going to go out and tear out the band shell and make changes. I felt it needed to be repositioned back to being a planning exercise. It is a plan still. It is getting to the right strategy ultimately for this area.'

While the Cultural Precinct proposed a transformation of Block One, which currently comprises of the Aurora Public Library, the Church Street School and the Library Square lands to potentially bring in mixed use developments north of the Library and a parking garage between the Library and the Cultural Centre, the CAO stressed that nothing is actually being implemented.

Block Two, home to Trinity Anglican Church, faced recommendations to accommodate a pedestrian thoroughfare and a re-alignment of Trinity's parking lot while Block Three, focusing on Town Park, proposed the removal of the existing baseball diamond and moving the band shell to that location to create a 'great lawn' event space.

Although Mr. Nadorozny was mum on the fine details of the reboot before it hits the Council table at the General Committee level on April 19, he said about a third of the report will focus on the journey to date to make sure everyone is 'on the same page.'

'When I say 'everybody,' I mean everybody 'even staff around the management table,' he said. 'There were times we weren't clear what 'implementation' means and where we were [with each block. We're] drawing a line on where we are now. Let's make sure we agree on that because if someone thinks we have gone farther than that, or someone doesn't recognize that we have done some of those things, we need to clarify that before any next steps.'

The rest of the report, he added, will identify four key milestones presented to Council for further consideration, including a rejigged consultation process they hope to have completed by the end of 2016.

'There will be no staff coming forward trying to do one-offs,' he said. 'There should be no implementation until Council has taken a look at the whole lay of the land and Council has made a decision.'

The Cultural Precinct Plan might have its supporters and detractors in the community, but many in the room on Thursday seemed warm to the idea of a reset.

'I encourage you to bring finality to the plan and actually start doing something,' said one woman. 'I am new to the neighbourhood, but one of the reasons we moved here was all the exciting things going on like the Market. Now you look at what's happening in Downtown Newmarket and how much they have in their community. It will be nice to see an emphasis on community activities to start and do something. Don't keep this process going and going and going.'

Added another: 'I just wish down the road before I die that Council will move on to different districts and give us a break!'