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Debate highlights business concerns in Yonge and Wellington corridors

By Brock Weir

In a debate hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, it should come as no surprise that Aurora's businesses were a top priority of the first Mayoral debate of the season.

In a series of wide-ranging questions developed by the Chamber, submitted to the Chamber through social media, and in questions directly from the audience, candidates Geoffrey Dawe and John Gallo zeroed their respective visions repeatedly back to Aurora's Downtown Core.

Asked to speak about what they each thought were the biggest challenges facing Aurora's businesses, Mr. Dawe was first up to bat. Encouraging businesses to develop was a top priority, he said, and to illustrate this, he said he has been ?working on a plan to rejig Yonge Street to make it a more consumer-friendly environment? in the vein of the main commercial areas of places like Kingston and Cobourg.

?We have implemented a [Community Improvement Plan] CIP, which the Town is now stepping up to say we wish to be part of this walk with you,? said Mr. Dawe. ?We wish to invest some money and help you move forward with your business.?

For Mr. Gallo, revitalizing Aurora's Downtown Core is ?essential? in moving forward. In his view, the blueprint is already there to do that in the form of Aurora's Promenade Study. To this end, he said he would implement a ?task force? to implement the principles of the plan, which include architectural and aesthetic standards for the area.

?There are many, many things that are going wrong that need to be fixed,? said Mr. Gallo. ?There are many businesses that are leaving downtown and moving either to the east of Aurora and becoming successful for very specific reasons and they should be encouraged to stay downtown and to deal with the many issues that they have.?

The number of business closures along the Yonge Street corridor remain steady, as well as elsewhere in Aurora, claimed another question submission, asking each candidate how they would go about bucking this trend. Mr. Dawe told the audience when he was an Aurora business owner he ?never expected? a government to give a handout, but he would have ?looked towards my municipal government to create an environment where I wished to be.?

?There are a number of businesses on Yonge Street that are extremely successful; we need to model those businesses,? said Mr. Dawe. ?We have, in the last couple of years, a substantial amount of private sector investment in our downtown core, all within a two-minute walk of Yonge and Wellington. We recently completed [the CIP] which is the Town stepping up and saying, ?Okay, you folks have done a lot. Now it is our turn. You want to invest some money in refinishing your storefront? We're willing to help you with that.' The Town is taking those steps in order to work with the business to help them be more successful.?

A key factor in business revitalization in the Yonge Street corridor is renewed focus on the Promenade Plan, argued Mr. Gallo. The plan has been ?sitting on the shelf? too long and it is time for action.

?I have sat down with business owners who?had to close their shop and they told me why,? said Mr. Gallo. ?We need to sit down with the Committee with a very specific mandate and we can move that plan forward. I believe that, amongst many other things, is something that will revitalize Downtown and stop this trajectory of stores that are closing.?

The Promenade Study was also key to focusing specifically on the Yonge and Wellington Corridor, but Mr. Gallo said he didn't think it was ?beneficial? to give ?specific details on what one would do to fix that problem.?

?It is a complicated issue and it is going to take some significant time and effort to solve that problem,? he said. ?Fortunately we have the base for it in the Promenade Study and a lot of time, money and effort was spent to develop that plan. It is time to implement it.?

Mr. Dawe, on the other hand, said he believed Wellington corridor is ?revitalizing itself.?

?A lot of those houses have changed ownership, people are investing substantially in those houses to create some very nice places of employment,? he said. ?I think what we have to do with Yonge Street is either we have to abandon it because it is the TransCanada Highway and nothing is going to happen with it, or we have to take a very bold move.?

This bold move is exploring the idea of taking Yonge Street in the Downtown Core down to a single lane each way with permanent parking on either side to make it ?more user-friendly? and a place where people want to come, spend time, and ?spend more money.?

Whichever candidate has the plan to get more people into Aurora's downtown core, the bigger question arises of where these people will go once they are here. ?Millions of dollars have been lost? as Aurora does not have overnight accommodation for conferences and sports events, argued one resident in a question. This was something both candidates agreed with, but had differing opinions on how the issue could be rectified.

?I have met with a number of hoteliers who have told me they are not in a position at this point to come into Aurora and build a hotel,? said Mr. Dawe. ?A hotel was actually approved for development in Aurora back in 2008 and then when the U.S. market tanked, they pulled out. That lot was then re-sold to a Canadian developer and we they have chosen, for whatever reason, not to go forward. I absolutely agree we need a hotel and we have been working with hoteliers to get them interested and actively engage in coming up here and providing that facility.?
Mr. Gallo, on the other hand, disputed the view that there was a lack of interest.

?I have already been approached by two developers,? he responded. ?Additionally, I have been approached by land owners in Town who are very interested in developing hotels on their properties. It is something I want to spearhead, it is a huge need in Town, but I think I want to stress that the baseline is it needs to be sustainable.

?A convention centre needs to be sustainable. I am not interested in spending tax dollars on an ongoing basis, on an operating basis, to bring something like that to Town. It needs to be sustainable.?