

Downey hangs up his tools after more than 40 years in municipal service



Memories were flooding back to Al Downey on Friday afternoon as friends and team members past and present came by Town Hall to wish him the very best on the next chapter of his life.

Downey, a long-time member of the Town of Aurora's Executive Leadership Team, who most recently served as Director of Operations, signed off last week after more than four decades in public service, the last 23 of which have been in Aurora.

"I am so proud of so many things that we have been able to accomplish," Downey told *The Auroran* on his final day, "but if I stop and think and close my eyes, I remember the people – all the people who touched me and I had the opportunity to work with truly amazing people, members of Council who helped me and guided me through difficult decisions that had to be made, and staff who went way beyond in order to make sure we are successful at whatever we were working on.

"The people and the staff I worked with in Aurora are what I am going to remember the most."

After coming to Aurora in 2000 following stints in Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Whitchurch-Stouffville, Downey helped oversee the development of the new Aurora Public Library building, the building of the Aurora Seniors' Centre, two fire halls, and, in his capacity as Director of Parks and Recreation, the development of scores of new parks and green spaces in all four of the Town's corners.

At last week's Council meeting, many of Downey's achievements were shared by municipal CAO Doug Nadorozny, who said that there were too many to share in just one evening.

Among those that made the cut were the introduction of the first municipal artificial turf field in York Region's Northern 6 municipalities, the implementation of "new, ground-breaking, energy-efficient technologies in the design and construction of the SARC, and leading the development of lands that are now home to the head office of Bulk Barn, York Regional Police headquarters, and numerous other businesses – not to mention two relatively new hotels coming to Aurora, something that has been long-needed in the community."

"There are many other studies, committees and leadership teams that Mr. Downey has played a significant role on, but I know among his proudest accomplishments are the construction projects he's led over the years," said Nadorozny. "Of course, numerous parks have been created during his tenure, but Al has also been responsible for the building of the SARC, the Aurora Public Library, the Aurora Seniors' Centre, and not one but two fire halls. Also, Al was responsible for the renewal of the Church Street School that is undergoing yet another facelift again, which speaks to how long he has been around, as well as the redevelopment of the Armoury, an award-winning project in Town Park.

"In all these projects, Al has worked tirelessly to deliver the projects on time and on budget. During the past seven-plus years, I have

very much enjoyed working with Al. His work ethic, commitment to the job, and his basic can-do approach has never faltered. His contribution to this community and this corporation has been immeasurable and his departure will be felt by many of us.?

Last week's meeting also afforded members of Council to pay tribute to the outgoing director.

While Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner asked him about some of his most notable projects, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said Downey could ?always be counted upon to be honest and straightforward.?

?If there's any question that needs to be asked in this community, you're the guy I go to,? he said.

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said he had the ?good fortune? to work alongside Downey for the last 12 years.

?You've always demonstrated tremendous dedication and passion to the role,? said Thompson. ?I truly believe you loved what you did?. Your knowledge and experience has been so insightful and so helpful and I have always really appreciated the honesty and the candour in which we have had conversations.?

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo said his relationship with Downey went back before his first election, to when Gallo started a ratepayers group.

?Over the years, we've had our battles, that's for sure, but it was but it was always in the best interests of the Town and I always respected your opinions and your knowledge and your experience. You have helped me along throughout the years on many different projects and I wanted to thank you for that and wish you all the best in retirement.?

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland hailed Downey as a ?great support? to whom she has reached out even before she was first elected in 2018.

?You guys (Downey and former Parks Manager Jim Tree) have done so much good for the community,? she said. ?I don't know what we're going to do without you here, and who we're going to call when we want to know the history or a backstory on [projects and facilities]. You seem to know every nook and cranny.?

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim said Downey wore ?his emotions on his sleeve? and hailed his ?honesty.?

?You're very apolitical in a very political Town and I really appreciated that. We helped save beavers, turtles, trees. We had multiple conversations about the tree bylaw? and I appreciate you being with us and equipping me as a Councillor.?

Last to speak was Mayor Tom Mrakas who said, ?From the bottom of my heart, all of Town Council, and I think all the residents in the community, I want to thank you for all that you've done because I think if it wasn't for you, there are a lot of things in this community that wouldn't have occurred.?

In response, Downey said Aurora has been a ?wonderful place to work? and the community was ?very embracing? from the start, giving him an opportunity ?grow and do things I never dreamed I'd have the opportunity to do.?

?I have made a million [mistakes] but learned from every single one and got an opportunity [for] tremendous things in all the communities I have been a part of. I'm lucky. I've been supported by family, I have been supported by friends, I have been supported by all my Council partners, and we're all partners in what we're doing. We always have been. I always felt I would give you what was the best advice I could give you. As John said, we didn't always agree and that's okay, but differing opinions created new opportunities and new opportunities created excitement within the community and I think Aurora has tremendous potential to grow, to continue to grow. I go through the Town, I take a look at all the changes that have happened since I've come on board, and the many opportunities that still exist.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter