

Downtown BIA sets course for the future after being sidelined by COVID

Aurora's Downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA) was barely a year into its mandate before the global pandemic forced them to put much of their work on the backburner. But, as the light at the end of the tunnel grows ever-brighter, the BIA is charting its course for the future.

Last week, BIA Chair Joanne Russo outlined plans for the year ahead that would not only support businesses in the Yonge and Wellington corridor that have been hit hard by the pandemic but continued efforts to make the historic core a draw once again.

The new plans address the realities presented by COVID-19 head-on.

Last year, the BIA decided to not ask property owners in its catchment area for the previously-established tax levy to fund their operations in light of COVID-19. But, as businesses begin to find their footing in this new normal, they brought forward a budget that will support BIA businesses through promotion, engagement and beautification.

One of our objectives for this year is to provide marketing, promote education, and to get support from the Town and the Economic Development Board in an effort to bring in new businesses that support the vision of the BIA, said Ms. Russo, noting that another objective is to assist enterprises in the BIA area with Canatrace, a program that helps businesses collect patron and employee information for contact tracing to bolster consumer confidence.

The BIA's 2021 Budget accounts for their traditional tax levy of \$40,000 money which is collected specifically from property owners falling within the BIA with funds left over from last year resulting in a total ask of \$37,553. Of these funds, \$10,000 has been allocated for marketing and campaigns, \$10,000 for contact support and communications, \$5,000 towards materials and printing, and \$6,400 for administration, including accounting and bank fees.

We need your help now more than ever, said Councillor Sandra Humfries of the BIA's role in supporting local business. Please continue to work hard, continue to get your teams together, and [keep] everyone together to really focus on how we can make our downtown successful. We have things happening in Town but we need the BIA badly in support of those initiatives.

Mayor Tom Mrakas offered similar sentiments.

Now more than ever we need the BIA, he said. The Downtown Core, our businesses, are struggling and it is more important than ever to get back up and running. I am looking for some better times I think we all are as we get through this pandemic and I think we can look to some exciting things, especially come the fall, when everyone gets vaccinated and we're able to get back out there again.

But a different view was offered by Councillor John Gallo.

Although he didn't discount the work of the BIA, he questioned the timing and whether businesses struggling in the core would be as receptive to stepping up with their tax levy at this moment in time.

I suspect every business owner is probably saying, I don't want to pay into that right now. I'm suffering. Everyone is suffering. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe some see the value, I just don't know, he said. Sitting here where I am and the information that is in front of me, I just don't know. If I say yes to \$40,000, does that equal businesses in that geographical area that are benefiting? Am I saying, You might not see a benefit in 2021, maybe it is 2022 or 2023 until we really establish ourselves?

From the perspective of a Councillor, he said he didn't have enough information in front of him to gauge just how receptive BIA member businesses might be right now.

'They are all questions I have that are obviously very difficult for you or anyone to answer,' he continued. 'To a certain degree, it is a leap of faith that we're doing this and there is a benefit to the community and the ultimate goal is to make those businesses and others in the community thrive. That is ultimately what we're all trying to do. I am supportive of that concept [but] there are a bunch of missing pieces I don't think anyone can answer in terms of what kind of feedback are we getting and how is this really working to achieve our goal.'

Ms. Russo said she agreed it is a difficult question to answer 'because we're really living in a different world right now' but businesses know there will come a time when they are able to pull themselves out of the pandemic and everything that has wrought.

'Right now, local support is very key and business owners are trying to find some sort of avenue as to? 'am I going to be able to [open my doors]?' she said. 'We know we're going to be there one day, so one of the things we're focusing on as a Board is [we] don't want to just impose a levy and do something that we feel will not benefit business owners because, you're right, we don't want to put this levy on during stressful times; our focus is on really trying to reach out and communicate with the members and trying to help them market themselves so that we can bring awareness ? 'Hey, I'm still here, operating, still open, these are what my new rules are, here's how you can help me.'

'The reality is our local businesses within the downtown core need our help, need our support. They want to keep their doors open and they want the community to help them. The only way to do that is by communicating with them and promoting and marketing them because they are struggling. The funding is geared towards the re-opening plan and the re-opening plan is going to only benefit them because? speaking to other BIAs, they are all struggling.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter