

Downtown murals will honour frontline workers

Future wall murals in Aurora's downtown core will honour frontline workers.

Council has instituted a street wall mural program following a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas last week that is intended to not only beautify Aurora's historic downtown but serve as a very public 'thank you' to all frontline workers who are working tirelessly to keep us healthy, safe and fed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Making his pitch to Council, Mayor Mrakas said a mural can create a sense of belonging and pride, while helping to reduce graffiti, tagging, and for neighbourhoods to 'shape their community through beautification and shared project goals.'

The program will allow artists to create murals on Town-owned retaining walls along Yonge Street from Aurora Heights Drive to Kennedy Street, with at least one mural earmarked to salute our frontline heroes.

'This was something former councillor Jeff Thom and myself had discussions in the previous term about looking at doing,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'The motion didn't materialize last term, we just never got to it, we were doing so many things. This term came along and I thought about bringing it forward. Just as I was about to bring it forward, we ended up in a state of emergency. I didn't think it was the right time [as we entered] the state of emergency to have the motion. After speaking with staff once again, I was encouraged to bring this forward at this time.'

'I thought it was a great way to tie at least one of the retaining walls dedicated to our frontline workers, and when I say 'frontline workers', I mean all of our frontline workers, everyone who has had a hand in helping this economy continue and not fall apart while we're going through this pandemic and, obviously, all of our healthcare workers and all of the tremendous work they have done.'

Any retaining wall identified by staff for the mural program should also 'speak to our community and have a tie to our community,' he added.

'This is a great opportunity for us to showcase our community spirit and engage our local arts and culture community and have them come out and do the incredible things that they do and create some incredible pieces of art within our community, especially in our downtown core. It will speak volumes to having that dedication to our frontline workers.'

The Mayor's motion received the unanimous consent of Council.

First to show their support was Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who seconded the motion.

‘To me, this is just going to provide another legacy for the Town of Aurora to remember this very unique year,’ she said. ‘Frontline workers are truly out there risking their lives day to day to keep us healthy, safe, strong. For me, this is a really exciting initiative: I think it is going to lift spirits in our Town.’

Similar sentiments were offered by Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said it was a great way to support local Aurora artists.

‘[The arts] is one of the few sectors that have been hit really hard and I think this comes at a really good time where we’re coming together as a community and engaging with one another, supporting one another,’ she said, noting the sheer number of occupations that are now considered frontline workers.

The spirit of community, she added, was a broad stroke that allowed local artists to let their full creative brushstrokes fly.

‘We’re going to leave that creativity to the artists, which is great, and I can’t wait to see what these program guidelines are and what the budget looks like, but I really do feel this is a really great way to come out of this, find opportunities and celebrate with one another.’

Mayor Mrakas noted there are at least three ‘major’ retaining walls that could be the subject of the new program, plus a few smaller ones that might also fit the bill. At the end of the day, it will come down to what is feasible and how the space can be used.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner added that the condition of each retaining wall should be taken into consideration sooner rather than later ‘because we wouldn’t want to paint something, then have to fix the wall and possibly hurt what is painted there.’

Mayor Mrakas agreed: ‘It is amazing what artists can do, given that it doesn’t matter what the size is of the canvas. There’s anywhere from three to six locations that can be utilized, but we will have staff come back and tell us in a report.’

By Brock Weir