

Downtown owners band together to revive BIA

By Brock Weir

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Local business owners have long expressed concerns with the state of Aurora's downtown core, but now traction appears to be on their side to do something about it.

Years after Downtown Aurora's last Business Improvement Area (BIA) fizzled out, momentum is backing the business owners of today as they pitch a revitalized BIA to Council, one they argue will, in turn, help revitalize Aurora's struggling traditional commercial corridor.

The pitch was made to Council last week by financial consultant Joanne Russo, whose Russo Corp. operates out of a heritage house on Wellington Street East.

Appearing at the podium before local lawmakers last Tuesday, she requested the Town's approval in once again establishing a BIA which would be volunteer-run and dedicated to 'improving and promoting' the historic core 'through investment and advocacy to build and maintain its position as Aurora's premiere shopping, business and entertainment destination.'

'We want to bring our historic Downtown back to what it used to be: the jewel of Aurora,' said Ms. Russo.

The initial proposed BIA would encompass Wellington Street East from Berczy Street to Yonge Street, and continue southward on Yonge Street to Church Street.

'In conjunction with the Town, we have surveyed 91 businesses and the results were overwhelmingly in favour of a BIA,' said Ms. Russo. 'We hope to join together with the Town to organize and carry out physical improvements and promote economic development in the historical district. Our plan is to enhance our business area to create an inviting atmosphere for local businesses and neighbouring residential areas and mostly to encourage pedestrian traffic in the Downtown Core. The time is right for a BIA as the Town's Library Square project begins to take shape and the renewed emphasis on expanded neighbourhoods comes to fruition.'

'Why do we do this? We do this for several reasons: we want to revitalize and beautify [Aurora's] historical centre and make it a destination for local residents to work, shop and play. We want to provide opportunities for area businesses to thrive through community events and focused advertising. Our three year plan will revitalize and beautify the Aurora Downtown Core and this will happen through the placement of benches, historic signage, lampposts, banners, murals, etc. Most importantly, we will create an entertainment hub anchored by several pedestrian-focused events that will spotlight our local businesses.'

Currently, she added, they're eying five seasonal events throughout the year.

Following this initial pitch, the legislative details need to be hammered out.

According to Mike de Rond, Aurora's Town Clerk, the first step from Town Hall's perspective will be sending notices to businesses in the impacted area. The comments received at the Committee last week, if ratified by Council this Tuesday, will then be sent back to staff for a report and the wheels can officially start to turn.

That might be a formality, however, as the BIA proposal got the clear backing of Councillors.

'I am really excited,' said Councillor Sandra Humfries. 'What is really important is your BIA is working closely with the Town and staff so we can put [downtown] priorities together and work towards that in the budgeting process. About four years ago, we came back to beautifying the downtown and improving some buildings, sidewalk areas and benches, and it was costly, about \$200,000, but we have to make it look beautiful, we have to make it look inviting.'

'People want to come back Downtown, they want to enjoy our Downtown, and it is our obligation as Council and future Councils to work towards that. Having a BIA that helps prioritize will help Council know what is really important to businesses in our community.'

Speaking in favour of the proposal, Councillor Michael Thompson noted the hard work it has taken to get to this point, but questioned how the BIA would be structured financially.

Proponents of the idea said the BIA would be financed through membership fees and sponsorship opportunities.

'We have looked at previous BIAs and they have tacked on a levy onto property owners,' said Ms. Russo. 'We surveyed 101 properties and, so far, the votes we have received to date have been very successful. The levy we're looking at is about \$400 per business owner and we're looking to the Town for support. We have completed a three-year projection that will be presented to Council.'

Revitalization, said Councillor Tom Mrakas, is a 'buzzword' that has been used for 'quite a long time' in Aurora, and he said he

was encouraged to see 'movement' towards realizing that goal. Having asked Ms. Russo about the excitement level she has seen from business owners as they take their idea door-to-door, she said there is 'tons of excitement' in the air.

'We all wanted to see change and we all wanted to be a part of that change and we know change is happening,' she said.

'Revitalizing the downtown and making it feel more historic is something we have all been waiting for. We just want to see it happen. We are all positive attitudes, all positive responses we've been receiving from local business owners.'

Adding there is still a lot of work to be done before the BIA is brought to fruition, Councillor Paul Pirri encouraged organizers to 'keep the faith' along the way.

'I think this is a fantastic opportunity to help revitalize the Downtown Core, get business buy-in, and support events and market the Downtown Core,' he said. 'There is a lot of work that is going to be involved in the next phase, which includes going out to get a formal petition through the Town, creating consultations, so good look and I look forward to supporting you along the way.'

Added Councillor John Abel: 'You must be extremely encouraged by the reception you've got. Keep going, and I know it is important to know how Council feels and if you're going to be supported. It looks very promising. Keep up the great work and we look forward to the next stage.'