

Downtown to benefit as Council approves Community Improvement Plan

By Brock Weir

A potential \$220,000 investment will soon be made in Aurora's Downtown Core following last week's Council meeting.

Council voted 8 ? 1 to implement Aurora's Community Improvement Plan (CIP), a series of programs which will provide financial incentives, financial support programs, and tax breaks intended to revitalize Downtown Aurora both aesthetically on existing heritage buildings, and to intensify and redevelop targeted areas.

Initiatives include a façade and signage improvement program to increase the visibility and attractiveness of area businesses, and tax and development charge deferrals for developers coming in to intensify current developments.

It also includes tax breaks for building owners renovating heritage buildings for commercial use.

For Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and the majority of Council, the program was a long-time coming in providing a boost for the Town's business community.

?We have to create an atmosphere for businesses to come and locate and in the last year there has probably been over \$10 million in direct investment in Downtown Aurora within a two minute walk from the corner of Yonge and Wellington,? said Mayor Dawe.

?This shows we are willing to work with those folks to make it the best place we can possibly make it.?

Added Councillor Wendy Gaertner: ?I support this; the Town has been trying to do something about revitalizing the downtown core for more years than I remember.?

The Community Improvement Plan will be just one plan in motion to help revitalize the area, going hand-in-hand with such initiatives as the Aurora Promenade Plan. For Councillor Michael Thompson, this was just one ?puzzle piece? that had shown success elsewhere and he said he was looking forward to seeing the results of this ?seed funding? a year on.

Business and property owners have been ?excited? about the plan, said Councillor Sandra Humfries in support of the CIP, and she too said she was looking forward to seeing the impacts.

?Having this as a first step in the right direction is really encouraging,? she said, noting the collaboration between private property owners and the Town to make this a success. ?There is going to be skin in the game from both and I am very excited by this opportunity.?

A particularly vocal proponent of the Aurora Promenade Plan, Councillor Chris Ballard echoed comments from Councillor Gaertner, citing the many years it has taken for a clear downtown plan, saying Aurora's ?decaying downtown? has been eyed for nearly four decades.

?This plan is designed to support the Promenade Plan,? he said, noting his support. ?I have some concerns in trying to figure out on behalf of taxpayers exactly how much this is going to cost over five years, but I think given there are two points where we can keep an eye on spending ? at budget and when applications come to Council ? I am comfortable we have those checks in place.?

He suggested tweaking the plan just slightly to allow in addition a Council member, ensuring the Mayor is on the Committee overseeing the CIP as he is Aurora's representative at the Regional Council table and would be able to leverage that in securing Regional support for CIP initiatives.

Citing Councillor Ballard's description of Downtown Aurora as ?decaying?, Councillor Evelyn Buck said she wondered if they were seeing the same Town.

She was the lone voice in her opposition to the plan. Businesses like Caruso & Company have thrived and just want Council to get out of their way.?

?We see beautiful businesses sprucing up premises and putting great stock into their stores and waiting for customers to come,? said Councillor Buck. ?Sometimes they last six months. Sometimes they don't last that long if they haven't got enough backing. I am not worried about the (Yonge and Wellington) block because everything that is happening north of the block and south of the block ? there are beautiful things happening there ? and they didn't need any funding from the Town to make it happen. I have seen nothing that has happened in Aurora over the last 40 years that encourages me to think there is anybody at this Town Hall that has a better idea on how to help businesses prosper than the people out there who are in business and just want us to get out of their way and let them get on with it.?