

"Endorsement" of Precinct plan causes Council confusion

By Brock Weir

Enthusiasm for the future of Aurora's Cultural Precinct was dampened around the Council table last week as local lawmakers, municipal staff, and members of the public alike expressed confusion over the next steps of the project.

Wording in the report before Council, argued some Councillors, implied Council was giving its endorsement to the conceptual plan, which would see a significant re-think in the look, feel and purpose of Aurora's Downtown Core, and moving towards an implementation phase.

Others, however, said the conceptual plan was just that ? a concept ? and moving ahead was the next step in honing a sharper vision for the future.

?I am not asking you to approve the concept, but I believe the approval in principle has already been given by Council with regards to the development of a concept for a Cultural Precinct and, with that, and with the approval moving forward with phase three, we are continuing on and hope to get to a point where Council will be provided with a report and recommendations on how to move forward, and the strategies to move forward, on a Cultural Precinct sometime in February or March,? explained Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation, who is taking the lead on the Precinct plan.

Nevertheless, wording in the report outlining Council's ?endorsement? worried some Councillors who, earlier in last week's Council meeting, were faced with significant concerns from area residents as well as members of Trinity Anglican Church.

?We all agree it is a great idea and is a vital part of how we're going to drive people to the Downtown Core,? said Councillor Jeff Thom. ?We certainly want to make sure we include as many voices as possible in the process, but when you look back at what we have done so far?the plan conceptually hasn't changed all that much [following public input]. The plan is almost identical to the original plan that was given to us. My concern is if we move forward, tacitly or otherwise, with the plan we have?it says consultation says the plan is great, which is not borne out by the people here.?

These concerns were shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who said there were many missing pieces to the plan so far, including an inventory of all ?historical? properties in Yonge and Wellington's southeast quadrant, parking studies, a study on the use of existing buildings (as well as re-use), any zoning changes that might be needed, the impact of multi-residential use on the neighbourhood, and the potential of ?commercial infiltration? into what has traditionally been a residential neighbourhood.

?I am prepared to receive for information and do nothing else with this, certainly nothing in principle,? she said. ?It is true that the community endorsed the idea of having a culturally-focused area in the southeast historical quadrant. That was entrenched in the promenade plan. I believe everyone at this Council table would like to see that happen, but it was just an idea. I think we have a wonderful opportunity to mark our Council as a very special forward-thinking, and a Council that really cared about making Aurora better for its residents. Let's be careful and let's do it right.

?From what I understand at the table and from what I have heard, ?receive for information tonight' is an endorsement of that plan. I see people shaking their heads, but it sounds to me that that is what is happening and that is what is already happening. I think due diligence needs to be done now.?

Among those disagreeing with this assessment was Mayor Geoff Dawe who reiterated the Cultural Precinct ?concept plan? is still in the incubation phase and remains a concept.

?Conceptual' is the word and we're not moving forward with anything but a concept,? said Mayor Dawe. ?I want to have all the information I can get before I make a decision on how I think best to move forward.?

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: ?Do I have some issues with the concept of the plan? I do, but I don't think it is the time and place to do it. We continue on the path we have provided our director to take with the consultants, get all the information we need to finally look at this, take the residents' concerns, sit down, lock the nine of us in a room and actually get something done with this area.

For me, this area, especially [the block bordered by Yonge Street, Mosley Street, Victoria Street, and Church Street] is something that will kick-start the revitalization of the downtown, something this Town needs, something this Town has been looking to do for 15 years. This time we have an opportunity to do it right, come out with a plan everyone can see and be happy with it, and the vision for Aurora can move forward in a way Aurora as a whole wants it to.?

From the perspective of Councillor Paul Pirri, now is not the time to delay.

?You don't grow a community by not doing anything and letting things wither and die. There is an opportunity to do something,? he said. ?What exactly that is nobody has known for the last 15 or 20 years. We're coming forward with a plan for the area to drive people not just to Yonge Street to go shopping, but hopefully to the Cultural Centre, to the Armoury, depending on what gets created there in the future.

?Is everything going to be rock solid in our conceptual plan? No. I would argue it is not intended to be, either. It gives an idea, it gives a vision, it gives something to aspire to, and I think that is what is important here.?