

## Historian wants Aurora to get on board with 175th anniversary of R.A.I.L.

Aurora was formally incorporated as a village in 1863, but some historians argue that Aurora's emergence really came a decade before with the arrival of the railroad.

The first locomotive steamed into what is now Aurora in 1853 and, with the 175th anniversary of its arrival on the horizon, a local historian says this is the chance to plan a party on which all residents can get aboard.

Historian David Heard is the driving force behind R.A.I.L., a concept he presented to Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) last week. With the anniversary just two years away, he said time was of the essence to build momentum

The vision is a festival to take place between mid-May and mid-June 2028 with a rail-themed music festival, railway-themed historical exhibits, a mural, and more.

"This is a two-year process," Heard told HAC last week. "This is bigger, I think, than Aurora's 150th. Aurora is a great place, and it's great to have a 150th (celebration), but being that first destination north of Toronto on the first locomotive built in Canada is pretty powerful."

Collaboration will be key in the success of R.A.I.L., he said, adding he's in the process of exploring external grants to help fund the festivities.

"With entrepreneurship, with a great team put together, maybe working alongside the Aurora Historical Society, I can assure you through hard work and team work, getting a grant like the last one (for Aurora 150 in 2013) of \$250,000? I believe we can achieve that by working with the Town, the Historical Society, working as a team, and going after this funding. It's not going to be on the taxpayers' dime.

"I think we have to make it public? It's the citizens that throw this all together and work together as a team. Teamwork is going to make this."

In his pitch to HAC, Heard recalled his childhood on Ross Street, a residential road in Aurora that no longer exists due to the expansion of the Aurora GO Station and Industrial Parkway, but ran roughly in alignment with the present surface entrance to the station of Wellington Street East.

"When I was a little boy, there wasn't a lot to do in Aurora. There were parks and you hung out, you went home when the streetlights came on, and that was pretty much it," he said. "Or, like me, you took a penny, put it on the rail line and waited for the train to come across and got yourself a big piece of copper.

"One of the things I noticed about Heritage Week (in February) was the inclusivity. My fascination with trains started because I was a little disabled kid. I couldn't get out a lot. I believe this type of event will get a lot of people to come out of all shapes, sizes, cultures, creeds, everything. What I'm doing here is asking for assistance and launching this vision and dream because it's the real deal."

### COMMUNITY SUPPORT INTEGRAL FOR HERITAGE WEEK

R.A.I.L. would be one way to build upon the momentum of Heritage Week, an initiative in which Aurora participated in February, according to Heard.

Coinciding with Family Day, the festivities included talks with notable local historians, self-guided tours, multiple interactive displays presented by Heard, and information booths.

While feedback was largely positive, community involvement will be key in its future, according to a report before HAC from Adam Robb, Heritage Planner for the Town of Aurora.

Aurora was one of the only municipalities across the province to organize and host a dedicated event for Heritage Week through its Heritage Advisory Committee and planning and development services staff, said Robb in his report. The majority of events or offerings across the province were organized/led by local libraries, dedicated committees, museums, historical societies or other independent cultural and non-profit groups. This matter is being raised, as despite the initial success of the 2026 Heritage Week Event, its organization was only made possible by the volunteerism and efforts of the organizing Committee members, the presenters, David Heard, and the redeployment of planning and development services staff/resources. Planning and development services staff will be limited in the ability to continue to lead and manage such Special Events, particularly as other priority department projects are forecasted.

While successful in its inaugural capacity, the Heritage Week Event runs the risk of potentially losing interest over time if not continually offering fresh/diverse programming and being given dedicated event management attention. Therefore, Planning staff will be requesting the assistance of other departments/divisions, community organizations or other groups to lead such special events moving forward. Otherwise, the Heritage Week Event may potentially have to be held biennially or in a limited capacity depending on other planning and development services department priorities from year to year.

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