

Hotel and sports facilities top tourism priorities

By Brock Weir

As thousands descend on the Greater Toronto Area for the ongoing Pan American Games, Aurora is now taking a serious look at how to make the Town a draw for tourism.

This week, Council will consider the findings of a new report which lays the foundation for the establishment of a Community Tourism Plan. A long-talked about initiative, the report presents a number of key recommendations to get a local tourism industry off the ground, but there are a few hurdles that need to be cleared first.

Chief among these is a lack of accommodation for visitors. Inadequate or, the complete absence of overnight accommodation for tourists has been a bone of contention for years, particularly during the last municipal election and as recently as this spring as Council demanded answers on the future of the former Howard Johnson's hotel site, which is not being used by the property's owners.

The single biggest concern raised was the lack of accommodations within Aurora, says the report, which was developed with the consultation of a number of community leaders, including representatives from Town Hall, the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, Sport Aurora, the Aurora Cultural Centre, Farmers' Market, and local theatre groups. Sport Aurora's collection of organized teams bring large volumes of athletes, coaches, trainers and spectators to Aurora throughout the year for tournaments and neighbouring communities benefit from the room revenue.

A second significant concern is the lack of a large gymnasium or multiuse facility that can accommodate larger events that Sport Aurora feels confident they could host. The issue will be looked at more closely with the development of a Sport Plan for Aurora, which was approved by Council in March 2015 and will be completed within the year.

To make this plan bear fruit, task number one, according to the report, is to establish tourism coordination and leadership in Aurora, something that is currently lacking. This would include bringing together advocates to toot Aurora's collective horn.

Although Aurora is lacking overnight accommodation, one thing it is not lacking is day trippers. The number of day trippers to Aurora is high on the average, but day trippers to Aurora are spending lower than the provincial average while they are in Town.

Developing a local tourism campaign is also a key tenet of the plan, as is engaging tourism partners.

Tourism businesses need to come together in Aurora as a sector of the economic community, says the report. The formation of a tourism advisory committee would allow those businesses to have a collective voice and work together to grow tourism activity and its economic impact to the Town. In order for the committee to function effectively and implement ideas there is a need to have a designated tourism facilitator that can provide coordination and regular communication between tourism businesses, key stakeholder organizations and the Town. A tourism coordinator could fulfil that role.

Training and the engagement of tourism operators and local storytellers is critical. Training and information sharing will help businesses in identifying their unique positioning and reveal opportunities for them to work together to develop a mix of experiences that can be packaged and promoted. This training focuses on assisting operators to identify their ideal customer, ways to meet or exceed expectations and how to reach visitors effectively through targeted marketing.

According to the report, Aurora's top tourism market is among Family Memory Builders, who account for 14 per cent of current tourists to the area. This group is primarily families with children looking for ways, as the moniker suggests, of creating lasting memories. Their destinations, according to findings, include the local festivals and events, the Farmers' Market, and Sheppard's Bush. Knowledge seekers, typically couples over the age of 55 with a high income, account for seven per cent of the market, seeking out the Aurora Cultural Centre, Hillary House, and local festivals and historic walking tours.