

Hotel renos highlight local need: Chamber

By Brock Weir

Visitors to Aurora's Howard Johnson Hotel, which has recently been operating under the name Aurora Inn, may have been surprised to find the hotel roped off for closure last week.

Citing renovations, the hotel is closed for the foreseeable future and the move underscores Aurora's need for viable accommodations, according to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

"[There is especially a market] as it relates to some of our bigger employers," says Judy Marshall, CEO of the Chamber. "They bring teams in all the time and there is a lack of accommodation for that."

The Chamber, she says, has worked to encourage hotel developers to believe it would be worth their while to invest in Aurora. Although there have been a number of people who have expressed interest in doing so, nothing has ever come to fruition, she notes.

"I think there needs to be enough data to prove to people that the hotel would be used," she says. "Let's say the banquet facilities and the entertainment facilities would be used. If you look at the number of events that are held in this Town you would definitely think the facility would be used on a regular basis."

"I would love someone to come into the Town. That would be fantastic. I know the Town has been working on it and they have met with a number of potential organizations to come in. Nothing has come to fruition yet, but they have put a lot of time into it."

Council recently tackled the issue of bringing a further hotel to Aurora, inquiring on the status of a potential hotel development in the industrial area near Leslie Street and Don Hillock Drive. Originally slated to be developed by Best Western, the property has since changed hands. Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, told Council plans had been "inactive for a while."

"It is our understanding there might be another future change of ownership on that site," said Mr. Ramunno, noting that would then be the second change of ownership on the property. "The original proponent was Mainstay Hotels. My understanding is there may be another change of ownership. We do have an approved site plan and an agreement that is ready to go. Mainstay proceeded to a point where we had put together a site plan agreement and they had paid certain fees and placed securities. They were ready to proceed with construction."

The establishment of a new hotel has also attracted attention on the municipal campaign trail in recent weeks. A hotel is also a factor in Aurora's Cultural Master Plan, which is due to be discussed at Council this week.

A key tenant of the Cultural Master Plan is to position Aurora's "culture" as a tourism asset to "enhance quality of life." The draft plan states Aurora wants to "work with the development community to establish a hotel and conference centre" coinciding with a forecasted increase in population.

"Research has demonstrated that the majority of tourists to Aurora are family and friends of residents," notes the Master Plan. "Key to enhancing tourism is building multi-layered or packed experiences that expose people to a range of different cultural sites and activities. Connecting cultural and culinary tourism is a growing trend that it was felt should be incorporated into thinking about tourism packaging and development in Aurora."

"Cultural resources and experience attract visitors and help grow tourism, an increasingly important component of economic development strategies in all communities. The Canadian tourism industry is an \$8 billion industry and cultural tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of a global tourism market."