

INSIDE AURORA: A Pedestrian Idea

By Scott Johnston

If you're like most Aurorans, you're planning to attend the Street Festival this week-end.

For several hours, rain or shine, Yonge Street will be converted into a couple of kilometers of pedestrian-friendly thoroughfare, with tens of thousands of people walking, browsing and shopping right in downtown Aurora.

Apart from the Canada Day and Santa Claus parades, it seems this is the only day of the year where there're a lot of people on Yonge Street. Or at least, spending any time there. It's certainly one of the biggest annual events held in town.

But briefly closing streets for fun and commerce isn't unprecedented in Aurora. After all, every Saturday through most of the year, a short stretch of Wells Street is blocked off for the Farmer's Market.

Again, on these days, large numbers of people come to this location to casually stroll amongst the various vendors, get some fresh air, and catch up with their neighbours.

These temporary road closures encourage artisans and small businesses, promote exercise, reduce transportation-related carbon emissions, and provide a hub for people to get together in the heart of town.

Both are extremely popular, but are only around for short periods.

So, this raises the question; would a permanent pedestrian-friendly market street be something that Aurora should consider in its plans for the future?

Right off the bat let me assure you I'm not considering Yonge Street. Even with the chicanes removed, I expect the Viva buses would have a hard time negotiating the traffic calming in the northeast quadrant as they tried to deke their way to either end of town.

And we don't need a multi-kilometre stretch, either.

A hike back and forth to opposite ends of the Street Festival is more than enough exercise, especially if you're lugging some awkward purchases on a hot day. And sustaining 500 plus vendors on a daily basis may be a bit much for a town of our size.

But maybe a smaller street would be suitable. Or perhaps one can be expressly created, such as within the new and revitalized Library Square, whenever that development occurs, and if the final design allows for it.

There's limited parking there, anyway, so why not just cater to pedestrians?

Certainly other cities have adapted this public space idea successfully; Amsterdam, Madrid, London, Paris, and Sydney, just to name a few.

We may not be as large as these locations, but our Street Festival and Farmers' Market experience has shown that the demand is there, and even attracts folks from out of town.

We don't have to go full-blown right away. Perhaps initially the space would be small, or only be in use a couple of days a week, with the leeway to expand it if and when the time is right.

Whether this space has permanent shops or features, or whether it allows for temporary stalls, or whether it's an actual street or more of a square or plaza, or even connected to a park, are all things that can be debated and discussed (and likely reported on in high-cost consulting studies) in order to obtain the right balance for our town.

There's even an opportunity to address or incorporate other suggestions that have come forward for the downtown core, such as those associated with music and art.

A destination such as this could also be used for town special events, either existing or new, and would be a terrific hub in the trails network.

Okay, so maybe I'm dreaming a bit big here, and the levels of interest or traffic volumes don't justify it right now. But perhaps someday soon, and with a few baby steps along the way, the time may be right.

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