

## Library Square and Hydro Funds are Mayor's priorities for year ahead



**By Brock Weir**

Deciding the future of both Library Square and Aurora's \$35 million Hydro Reserves were at the top of Mayor Geoff Dawe's 2015 priority list as he prepared his annual speech to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

The annual address to local business leaders and the community alike is often thought of as a blueprint of the Mayor and Council for the year ahead, but with a new Council elected just a few short months ago, things are still getting up and running.

Things are looking promising from the business perspective, he told *The Auroran* ahead of his speech. Companies like Cube Plastics on Industrial Parkway North are taking over large-scale spaces, relocating here from other municipalities. "Interesting enquiries" have also been received at Town Hall regarding the purchase of business lands on Leslie Street, with some movement expected in March, he said.

Challenges, however, are also being felt with Target getting ready to close up shop, resulting in a loss of over 100 jobs, and that is a challenge Aurora can play a part in addressing.

"You work with local agents, you work with local developers to help them do their marketing," said Mayor Dawe, noting 3,000 housing units slated for the east side of Town in the near future. "There is an implied market that is coming in over the next couple of years and we have other developments as well."

As more people move into Aurora, Council will need to consider the service levels provided by the municipality for both existing residents and residents to come. Recreation space, particularly fields, is already at a premium in Aurora but an assist from the Province can help address part of the problem.

Aurora has been working with the Province to secure lands on the north side of Bloomington Road, behind Cardinal Carter Catholic Secondary School and the York Catholic District School Board headquarters for recreation space. After talks with the province stalled more than once, Mayor Dawe senses there is some significant movement on the horizon after he had a chance encounter with Premier Kathleen Wynne recently at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference, where they made their pitch to her.

"Since then, it seems to be moving at a much greater clip," he said. "I have no doubt the Premier has put a bug in someone's ear. Our sense is within the next six months we should be seeing some resolve around that."

While these lands have been discussed as a location for future sports fields, the southwest quadrant of Town provides opportunities for future sports development, he added. Sports tourism has been a theme of the first few months of the new Council and, in the Mayor's view, using money from the Hydro Reserves for a facility such as an aquatics centre to provide just the second 50-metre pool in York Region could go a long way towards making Aurora a destination.

"When we went out to the public [seeking suggestions on what to do with the Hydro Fund], although there was lots of input, there was nothing that was really definitive," said Mayor Dawe. "There was a lot of 'reduce my taxes' but there wasn't a heck of a lot of definitive suggestions. In my opinion, these monies came from the disposition of a substantial town asset, so I think it should go back into a substantial town asset, so why not a community centre or something like that?"

This money could also be used to finally make a firm decision on the future of Library Square. The old Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre buildings on Victoria Street are "not particularly efficient", he said, but he doesn't see a solution in simply knocking them down for parking. Parking lots, he said, are not "a good use of either public money or public space."

Creativity is key, he notes, and if the two buildings come down they need to be replaced with something "modern, and much more usable community space", perhaps attached to the Church Street School with underground parking.

While the Province can play a helping hand in addressing Aurora's leisure crunch, the Federal Government can play a part in fostering a "needed, big discussion" in collecting revenue more efficiently. Property taxes, he said, are not the best way to do it and there needs to be a "conversation" on making the shift. While municipalities collect less than nine per cent of tax revenue, they account for 70 per cent of infrastructure.

"Property taxes are not the way to do that because they are not indicative of an ability to pay," said Mayor Dawe. "If your house is valued, for some reason, at twice what your neighbour's house is, your taxes are automatically higher but it costs the same amount for you to go to the Library and get out a book as it does for your neighbour. Given municipalities are essentially a service-based organization, why should you pay more to go to the library than your neighbour?"

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