

Master Plan maps new and traditional ideas for Aurora's culture?

By Brock Weir

The old cliché goes, 'If you build it, they will come' but what if it is built and you have no idea where you're going?

That will be one issue addressed by Aurora's Cultural Master Plan when it comes forward next year. Councillors received an update on the Master Plan last week. The plan was put into motion this year by Council to provide a comprehensive long-term view for many of the cultural assets in Aurora, including places like the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Aurora Public Library, as well as local theatres and community groups.

According to Greg Baker, a consultant tasked with bringing the plan to fruition, the plan will not only be comprehensive, it is also hoped it will ultimately be cohesive.

'A cultural community can sometimes be a bit fractured and fragmented, with arts groups not always working effectively, or as well as they might with heritage groups and other kinds of cultural activities,' said Mr. Baker.

'Part of what this Cultural Master Plan is about is trying to build a cultural identity in Aurora into other plans and priorities in the municipality. Aurora is already doing well with things like the Promenade concept plan with a strong cultural dimension to it, a cultural heritage district, and even to push that envelope further, considering culture and other aspects of municipal properties.'

According to Mr. Baker, Aurora's Cultural Master Plan follows somewhat of a trend, being one of the latest in over 50 Ontario municipalities that have thrown resources behind coming up with a cohesive plan for local culture. A primary reason for this growing trend, he added, is that culture can be an economic driver for a community.

'We used to think economic development was about tracking big industry or big businesses and people would invest and follow those businesses,' said Mr. Baker. 'We now know that if you build communities in which people want to live and work, that investment and those businesses follow to keep them up, and not the other way around. Quality of place and culture is an important competitive advantage, economically.'

'Creative cultural industries like digital media and design, web design, and sound recording are some of the fastest growing businesses in the world today. There are also small businesses, but not huge barriers to entry in terms of capital investment. There are opportunities for employment and youth, and opportunities to grow small businesses. [As for] opportunities for tourism, we talk about place-based cultural tourism. People don't travel to see one attraction, but travel to experience what can be learned about a community and all its cultural assets, and culture's contribution to downtown revitalization.'

Part of making this a reality, he added, is doing extensive 'cultural mapping' which he identified as a key foundation stone of the plan. Cultural mapping, is more than just plotting a point on a grid, but providing an approach to 'identifying and classifying' various things that could be considered a 'cultural resource' within the community. And this could go well beyond bricks and mortar.

'All kinds of festival events, including Farmers' Markets and significant natural and cultural heritage features, intangible assets, stories, and customs that give a community a unique place, space in facilities, and community based centres, churches, and other places are venues for cultural activities,' he said. 'Volunteer-based grassroots organizations, historical societies, [are] sometimes not on the formal radar screen of government, but they really have a lot to do with the vitality of culture in the community.'

Interviews with various 'cultural stakeholders' within the community, whether they are volunteers, or could represent groups or organizations which could be construed to a cultural connection, continue this week with working groups following over 40 interviews with the community earlier this month. The Cultural Working Group came up with a list of over 80 potential stakeholders and, working together, whittled that list to a more manageable half, consisting of cultural groups and businesses.

When asked by Councillor Wendy Gaertner last week of some of the selection processes, Mr. Baker said the working group selected organizations such as Welcome Wagon to get a handle on how to engage newcomers to the Aurora community.

?The group felt that many new residents in Aurora are coming from diverse communities and there was a desire to interview someone who was in touch with residents of that community and get some sense of their perspective of what culture meant and what was important in Aurora,? said Mr. Baker.

Aurora's Cultural Master Plan is due this spring.