

Mayor optimistic about community, business growth as he seeks re-election



By Brock Weir

Taking to the podium last year at the annual Mayor's Luncheon hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe announced the incoming arrival of Bulk Barn's headquarters to Aurora.

Now, with their official move and opening little more than a month away, Mayor Dawe, who formalized his intentions to run for re-election just before Wednesday's Chamber Speech, says the past year has been one of growth and there is only more to come. Since his last speech, York Regional Police have essentially completed their move to their new headquarters on Don Hillock Drive, but most business and commercial growth can be seen in small to medium sized businesses.

Opportunities, however, are still to be realised in the Town's east side.

"Companies are spreading their wings," he says, citing incoming companies like Niche Décor, as well as companies like Prolinium Biotech, which is on the cusp of an international expansion. "The big one now is Desjardins has announced they are purchasing State Farm. We met with them and every indication is they will be staying right here in Aurora.

"Desjardins has a number of offices in Toronto, so this might be an opportunity to consolidate some expansion there. Speaking to State Farm about 18 months ago, one of the things they were exploring was the ability to build additional space there. They have space, so Desjardins may be able to look at rationalizing and building some new space there because they have some pretty high rent space in Downtown Toronto."

To see growth in action, Mayor Dawe says one only needs to look as far as the intersection of Yonge and Wellington for some prime examples. Although it is not "in your face", it is happening. \$10 million in private money has been invested within a two minute walk of the busy four corners, he says, citing Aw, Shucks! renovating and taking over the former home of Thompson's Furniture, the recent sale of Aurora Downtown Hardware to a new property owner, and, on the northwest corner, the purchase of the Dollarama and LW plaza to developers who are "progressive and looking to do something with it and not just parking tenants there and getting cash flow."

"I think that speaks volumes to where we can actually move our businesses," says Mayor Dawe.

To make that happen, there are a number of plans in the works that will work in conjunction with each other. The most impactful of these, he says, will be the Community Improvement Plan, which will also be up for discussion by Councillors this week.

The plan outlines a number of initiatives, each coming with a cost, to stimulate downtown business including tax breaks, the deferral of development charges, and façade improvement programs.

“Both the business sector and the government sector dance around getting skin in the game and I think this is an opportunity for us to say we’re putting skin in the game. Let’s get something going because if a private business wants to invest and save their store front and fix that up, we will also step into that and put some money towards that. If we both have skin in the game, we are both motivated to make it work.”

Selling the plan to the public that this is where some of their tax dollars should be going is something he admits will be a challenge and a “burr under some saddles.” Mayor Dawe sticks to his philosophy that “a rising tide floats all boats” and a successful business community, with some public investment, will translate into a successful community overall “more jobs here at home, less of a need to commute, and morning and rush hour gridlock a thing to avoid.

As much as the Municipality can do to stimulate growth and development, the Federal and Provincial Governments need to step up to the plate as well, he argues. To this end, Mayor Dawe says what is needed is a strong National Transit Strategy to stimulate the economy and get people out of their cars.

“A number of 905 mayors met with the Premier last week talking exactly about transportation services, how we’re going to pay for and implement them, and the whole need for a comprehensive strategy,” he says. “Interestingly enough, although Toronto will probably be the one garnering the biggest benefit out of any Strategy, they are most underrepresented. The 905 Mayors are really on side with the need to do this and the need to pay for it, firmly on side.”

The 905 Mayors are also keeping a watchful eye on education and are almost uniformly on side with seeking a post-secondary institution in their own hometowns. Aurora, however, recently lost a foothold in the game after talks to bring in a satellite campus with a university, namely the University of Windsor, fell through.

“They have decided not to move ahead,” says Mayor Dawe. “We wanted to talk to Windsor because one of the concerns is you don’t want to cannibalize your current base. Windsor does not have a population from the GTA and this would have potentially been an opportunity for them to expand their student base. Unfortunately, it didn’t work out but we’re working on other options. Every municipality in York Region has got nibbles [from universities] and everyone is playing it close to their vests.”

That wasn’t the only recent disappointment on a post-secondary level as talks to bring a Fab Lab, in partnership with Seneca College and the Region of York, into Aurora, potentially converting the old Aurora Public Library building, came to a halt.

“Unfortunately, it does not look like it is going to go ahead in the form that we envisioned,” says Mayor Dawe. “They had a change in some of their senior management and that has been, at the very least, been put on hold while they re-examine the issue.”

With that, the conversation surrounding Library Square has changed and further options will soon be coming forward, he says, revisiting previously examined potential for the site.