

Mayors look to keep university hopes alive

By Brock Weir

York University rejected Aurora and Newmarket's pitch for a new university campus straddling the two municipalities last week.

But, the two proponents of the plan, Aurora Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and Newmarket Mayor Tony Van Bynen, are not ready to let the plan go to waste just yet.

Discussions continue between the two mayors on just where to go from here after York University announced they were proceeding into May with a shortlist consisting of bids from the City of Markham, the Town of Richmond Hill and the City of Vaughan.

Aurora previously courted a satellite campus of the University of Windsor over the past two years into the early weeks of 2014, but those plans fell through. The time might be here, said Mayor Dawe, to look for other suitors.

"We are actually going to get together next week to discuss that," says Mayor Dawe on meeting with his Newmarket counterpart to discuss other options. "We are going to have some initial discussions next week to see whether that would make sense to pursue."

"Would I change anything that we did [with this bid]? No, I don't think so. I think we not only answered York's criteria, but the province's criteria and one of those criteria was underserved areas and I think that certainly describes where we are. Obviously York didn't feel that way and that is their decision."

Proximity to the urban dynamic was an "obvious point" in favour of the three more southerly municipal bids, he added, noting there was "no question about that" when the whole process started.

"Another Provincial criterion was what this would do in terms of the future economic impacts and certainly our position was that it would have a substantial impact on this area. That kind of driver would be far more impactful in this area than it would farther south. It is the same dollars but going into a much larger economy down south."

In a statement released on Friday, just after York made its decision known, the Mayors expressed disappointment but wished the three other municipalities well as they moved forward.

"I would like to thank York University and Seneca College for providing the opportunity to host a post-secondary campus in Aurora and Newmarket," said Mayor Dawe. "While I am disappointed that our innovative bid will not be considered during the next round of evaluations, I remain encouraged at the prospect of a university in York Region. I am hopeful that whichever option is considered supports our goal and the Government of Ontario's goal of providing educational opportunities to underserved communities, such as those in northern York Region, Simcoe County and Durham Region."

Added Mayor Van Bynen: "While we will not be moving forward to the next round of evaluations, this opportunity has demonstrated our community's firm resolve to work together to provide post-secondary education opportunities to the most underserved area in Ontario."

York University was expected to release a shortlist of two bids on Friday. When they made their wishes known, however, they expanded this to a list of three.

"We heard such remarkable presentations from these three municipalities who went far above and beyond to showcase their capabilities and commitment that we decided to expand our list," said York University President Mamdouh Shoukri in a statement. "We believe that any one of these three candidate municipalities would be excellent partners in this major undertaking. York University is deeply honoured that so many municipalities in York Region are interested in working with us. All participating have demonstrated a strong commitment to postsecondary education, and full support from their local councils and communities."

Added Seneca College President David Agnew: "Every potential partner in York Region made an excellent case for an expanded postsecondary presence. We are delighted to be working in a strong partnership with York University to expand access to today's and tomorrow's students."

The University noted they believe Markham, Richmond Hill and Vaughan "stood out" with well-developed transportation infrastructure that could bring in students from across the GTA, as well as their "vibrant urban centres."