

New BIA is ready for business



By Brock Weir

After more than a year of preparation and proposals, Aurora's new BIA ? Business Improvement Area ? is ready to hit the ground running in helping transform the historic downtown core back into a destination.

Council formally approved the establishment and membership of the BIA last week, putting in place a group of eight community stakeholders to bring their goals to fruition, and these goals include melding the heritage character of the core with incoming developments in the future, including the new Aurora United Church.

Helping to steer these objectives are members Mauro Bucci, representing several area building owners, property owner George Condoyannis, Aurora Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Sandra Ferri, restaurateur Mary Georgopoulos, lawyer Jack Laurion, realtor Lenard Lind, consultant Joanne Russo and businessperson Kasie Savage.

?The time is right because of development that is happening on Yonge Street and the push that is happening with Library Square,? says Ms. Georgopoulos on why there is momentum behind a BIA. ?Timing is here and the people are a lot more open to it. The Town seems a lot more engaged in wanting to revitalize Yonge Street and have more of a focus ? and I think the election probably helped that as well.?

A BIA, according to organizers ?is integral to advancing a distinct, livable, vibrant and resilient business district in its local community? and the historic downtown is the obvious candidate for such a district. Downtowns represent ?sustainable development, making best use of our existing infrastructure and creating compact communities that encourage walking, cycling and transit use? while having ?historic connections to the origins of the community.?

They define their mission statement as ?a volunteer-run organization committed to improving and promoting the Aurora Historical Business District through investment and advocacy to build and maintain its position as Aurora's premier shopping, business and entertainment destination.?

Their goals are to use membership fees and sponsorship opportunities to ?revitalize and beautify the Aurora historical centre and make it a destination for local residents to work, shop and play? while ?provide opportunities for area businesses to thrive through community events and focused advertising.?

Their plan includes a three-year outlook to revitalize and beautify the downtown core through street benches, lamp post banners, historic metal building and lawn signs, piped in street music, building murals and a historic metal archway, all to be sourced locally wherever possible.

But all this is for nothing without people coming to the downtown core to enjoy it. To that end, the BIA proposes a number of community events introduce ? or reintroduce ? people to Aurora's historic centre. These include an on-street kickoff to the Aurora Farmers' Market season in the spring, an expanded Aurora Chamber Street Festival and Canada Day Parade in the summer, keeping stores open during each occasion and provide incentives to get attendees into the stores. Similar events are proposed for the closure of the Farmers' Market in the fall and the Santa Under the Stars Parade.

They also hope to introduce new community events such as a ?Taste of Aurora? on an August Saturday that will see a street closure

with food being served on the street to the sounds of live music and entertainment, and activities for kids. ?Christmas Midnight Days? are also proposed for two Saturdays in the winter that would see stores open until Midnight, carollers lining the streets, and special offers from merchants.

This is not the first time Aurora has flirted with a BIA. Others have come and gone over the decades, but this one intends to have staying power ? and they feel the community has their back.

?I think you need a lot of community support from all around to be successful, not just from the Board itself,? says Ms. Russo. ?You need to have engagement from other local businesses. [A lot of people have questions] about what change you are going to bring forward and what changes are happening in Aurora more than anything else. There is a movement of wanting to see more livelihood in the downtown core, and we're looking to bring what Mary calls ?the jewel of Aurora' back. It's our history.?

Adds Ms. Georgopoulos, ?We want people to take pride in their downtown core and want people to visit and not avoid it.?