

New focus on economic development needs to be steered with business expertise: Committee member

By Brock Weir

Economic development in Aurora is set to shift gears significantly this fall as the final details are hammered out on a new Board to steer the ship.

Aurora's new Economic Development Board, which was approved by Council earlier this year, will carry on the work of the Town's long-standing Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC), but with a new structure, one which will give it a little bit more 'teeth' to guide economic development and with money to pursue initiatives.

With Aurora set to begin the recruitment process for Board members, Marilee Harris, a two-term member of EDAC says a business perspective is essential going forward.

'I think there is a real risk if you don't lean heavily on business expertise to do some good bureaucratic things within a municipal environment, but they aren't necessarily going to give you measurable results,' says Ms. Harris, who has an extensive corporate background. 'I think a business perspective needs to be all about priorities and metrics. Numeric metrics are the key for this Board going forward. How are we going to measure the success of any plans, programs, efforts, staffing, and spending in dollars?'

Looking back over her time on EDAC, Ms. Harris says her first term was 'a very good one' as the Committee benefited from the involvement of the Mayor, a good chair, and a fruitful discussion and understanding of just what EDAC was and its role within a larger municipal system.

The clarification, she says, was pretty simple: the role of EDAC was to assist whatever priorities the Town determined were on its agenda and to provide assistance when asked.

'I would say the major achievement in the first four years was to help clarify, based on the strategic plans, work the Town had done, to clarify what were the economic development priorities for the Town and, therefore, the priorities for staff working on economic development,' she says. 'That was a big achievement getting that clear, organized and focused. That was retained through the second term as well: the same priorities and a follow up on a regular basis about what progress was being made against those priorities.'

While that was retained in her second term, there were some growing pains.

'The second term suffered from some of the new members - both Council and public members - having a lack of understanding of the Town's priorities,' she says. 'In the spirit of making suggestions, which is welcome, there are limited resources that can be applied to stay focused on your big priorities.'

This confusion caused EDAC to be less productive than it could have been, she admits, with some members bringing to the table 'a lack of willingness to understand how the priorities were established' and what their role was.

'It caused the Committee to possibly be somewhat less effective,' she says, noting there was not a time where the Committee wasn't called upon enough for their input. 'I would say as a general comment that Council was very supportive of EDAC and appreciated the expertise of the Economic Development Committee and frequently requested that Town Staff lean on EDAC for advice to help Council make decisions.'

'The most effective role that EDAC played, and I am speaking as a public member, a business person, we instilled a sense of prioritization and measurements that is important for the Town economic development efforts going forward to stay focused on what is important.'

But that is now a legacy as EDAC has been wound down in favour of the incoming Board.

In recent years there has been a push by the Committee for what Ms. Harris describes as 'more senior expertise applied' to economic development in Aurora, a push she describes as 'continual.'

The watershed moment came with the hiring of Aurora's incumbent CAO, Doug Nadorozny.

While Aurora searched to fill the vacant post, a background in economic development was considered a significant asset.

'EDAC was happy their recommendations for increased leadership and expertise in economic development were in fact listened to and, with the hiring of Doug, that is one of the attributes he does bring to the table,' says Ms. Harris. 'The Board will have some new opportunity to access funding that EDAC would never structurally be able to follow up on. I think the big issue with EDAC is leadership and having staff dedicated to working with business leaders as appropriate.'

'I think it is prudent of Council to want to have some advisory committees on certain subject matters and I am happy they have it for Economic Development. I hope that going forward with the new structure of the Board that there is a requirement for business and

financial expertise in the makeup of that Board. I think that is essential in being able to manage progress.?