

New Food & Cultural Festival this September gets green light

By
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A new Food & Cultural Festival will take over Town Park this September after getting the go-ahead from Council last week.

The Aurora Food & Culture Festival was pitched by Councillor Harold Kim as a way to enhance the Town's existing Multicultural Festival and pick up where the now-defunct Multicultural Festival in Newmarket and Richmond Hill's Taste of the Hill left off.

Operated by Sports Horizons Inc., the Festival will take place Friday, September 6, on the eve of Aurora's Multicultural Festival, and proponents say it will foster ties between Aurora and Barbados.

"We have been working with [Councillor Kim] for some time now on how to expand our intercultural activities in our community," said Sports Horizons' Ron Kellman, in his delegation to Council. "Less than a week ago, we brought together twelve people from our community to discuss the advancement of interculturalism and the implementation of an event that shoulders the existing multicultural festival the Town has implemented and grown for many years. Our event had significant planning accomplishments and we wanted to see if it had the support of various cultures within the community, and we weren't surprised by the enthusiasm. We wish to operate an intercultural event that brings various cultures together of varying purposes with the goal of exchanging ideas and cultural opportunities."

While the event will largely take place at Town Park, some of the festivities will take place inside the adjacent historic Aurora Armoury which, if construction deadlines are met, will be the public debut for this long-awaited project.

"It will be a unique opportunity for up to 200 people to experience a newly-opened venue, sample cultural food, beverages, experience unique music from other cultures," said Mr. Kellman. "We're also working closely with the Barbados Government to establish a gala evening on September 7 to support specific local and regional cultural interests."

According to Councillor Kim, the Festival has been in the works since the late winter following meetings between Sport Horizons officials, Councillor Kim and Mayor Tom Mrakas. Following this meeting, talks took place between the organizers and Barbados' Ministry of Tourism and strong interest was found in the Caribbean.

"This is the kind of vision I had when I

first [proposed] the Multicultural Festival three years ago," said Councillor Kim. "I was excited [about this opportunity], the Mayor was excited about it, then the Prime Minister of Barbados came and did a Town Hall in Scarborough and we had an opportunity to meet with her and her contingent. A lot of good conversation happened in terms of other partnering ideas. Last month, the Consul General from Barbados came up to visit us with her team and she reiterated her commitment to be involved with the food and culture event on the Friday night.

"They have committed tens of thousands of dollars with respect to bringing up their chef, Bajan dancers. They are investing in quite a bit bringing people over from Barbados for this event. We thought, let's give this a try and see if we can make it work independently of the Town with some small support from the Town with respect to the licensing and the leasing of Town Park."

Discussions have also taken place, he added, with Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute, which is expected to formally take over the Armoury space this September, for the purposes of food demonstrations and tastings.

While questions were raised around the table on Councillor Kim's last minute ask for \$5,000 of public money to make this event a reality (see page 12), Council members were largely enthusiastic about the new festival and the benefits it is hoped to bring to the community.

"This is a great opportunity," said Mayor Mrakas. "You have a country that is willing to spend money to bring mixologists, jazz players and all sorts of people to our community. This is an incredible opportunity to create actual tourism, to have people coming from all over the place. [When the Consul General came] and saw all the sites like Niagara College, the Cultural Centre [she] was amazed by the beauty and heritage of our Town and thought this would be an incredible opportunity to bring Bajans to Aurora and have them celebrate the uniqueness our Town is.

"When I heard the Prime Minister speak about how Bajans feel about their community and what it is all about, I see a lot of similarities between the Town of Aurora and Aurorans. It's that value and respect for our community. There is so much linkage, I think, between our two communities that it makes sense for us to do something like this."

Councillor Michael Thompson was of a similar view, stating there is "tremendous value" in bringing this festival to Aurora, a view echoed by Councillor Sandra Humfries.

"I am really excited about this additional day," she said. "I think the Town needs more events like this. People are looking forward to these after-hours and weekend ways to enjoy events like this with their families and friends. It brings a community together."