

New plan intended to boost economic development in Aurora

By Brock Weir

Aurora is set to overhaul its economic plans in implementing a new system after a survey found the current model was falling short. Council is set to ratify a plan this week that will set in motion a new 'hybrid' economic development system that will take the Town's current system and bring in elements of a 'non-profit development corporation' using funding currently allocated for Aurora's Community Improvement Plan (CIP).

In a recent survey of Aurora's current Economic Development Model, which provides in-house services 'to ensure strong connections between [municipal] departments' to encourage cooperation and enhanced customer service for economic development clients,' was found to be falling short by the majority of respondents.

Feedback received through the study showed an apparent 'difficulty' in attracting new business to Aurora, 'no clear mandate' for the Town's current Economic Development Committee, a perception of their being 'very little priority on economic development' and 'personality conflicts.'

The proposed new system is intended to address those concerns through the creation of an Office of Economic Development. 'There are a number of economic development models that can be employed to drive economic development priorities,' said Anthony Ierullo, Aurora's Manager of Strategic Planning, in his report that came before Council at last week's General Committee meeting, noting that a community like Aurora would typically employ a model already in place.

This, he said, is primarily due to the resources needed to operate a non-profit development corporation, which are typically arms-length bodies not bound to the limitations of the Municipal Act regarding bonusing and land acquisition, and are often eligible for funding that municipalities like Aurora are not.

'This is primarily due to the cost of administering a traditional Non-Profit Development corporation, the active role of Regional government in leading investment attraction activities in York Region and the Town's position as an established community that is approaching build-out,' Mr. Ierullo continued. 'However, there are a number of opportunities that are unique to non-profit development corporations that align with the planned economic development focus in Aurora.

'They have the ability to provide incentives to business to promote economic development. There are several hundred acres of privately owned employment land that are coming to market in coming years. The Town may benefit from having the ability to offer business incentives to select instances as a potential differentiator for large scale investment in Aurora. In addition, non-profit development corporations have the ability to acquire, manage, redevelop, and sell real estate to advance economic development opportunities. This may be beneficial in the Town leading downtown revitalization activities and actively promoting employment development.'

Should Council greenlight the new plan this week, further plans will be presented to Council in the coming weeks that will see plans to expand the Office of Economic Development take shape, which would then be supported by a non-profit development corporation governed by a committee or board that would provide strategy to Council.

Concerns around economic development are nothing new around the Council table, or around the existing Economic Development Advisory Committee for that matter where, in the latter instance, members have continually said they have felt they don't have a clear mandate and their recommendations are not given their proper weight.

Adopting the proposed 'hybrid' model, however, received clear support at last week's General Committee meeting.

'I think it is going to be a progressive move for us,' said Councillor John Abel, who has been a vocal critic of the current setup. 'There is a gap and it is being addressed. I like the idea of interviewing committee members. That is important if they are going to be their own identity rather than an advisory committee. It is good to bring the best forward in such a role and it is a very important part of how we govern. For sustainability and all those other points, I am glad to see this.'

To date, Council has placed \$200,000 into a fund for the CIP, which is intended to be an incentive for property owners in Aurora's historic Downtown Core to improve and maintain their commercial buildings but, according to CAO Doug Nadorozny, the pot has been 'underutilized.'

'One of the outcomes of deploying this new model for economic development is we would hopefully create more business related to the CIP and more activity and actually start to use those funds in a proactive way,' he said.