

Plans for traffic, parks in Aurora Promenade could be put on ice

By Brock Weir

Plans for the next phase of the Aurora Promenade Plan could be put on hold this week.

Councillors last week voted to put the brakes on the Aurora Promenade North Tertiary Study which would focus on the Aurora Promenade area north of Yonge Street and Wellington Street.

From the perspective Aurora's Planning Department, a tertiary plan for the area in question would help coordinate traffic, the use of land and open spaces, built form, and the overall look of the area.

It would also look at the impacts of traffic and heritage legislation in the area, address transit needs, and guide redevelopment in the area.

Staff also continue to deal with concerns over the high level of traffic volumes in the Yonge and Wellington Street intersection; and the potential exists to plan for the better use and linkages of existing green spaces, and their integration into the existing neighbourhood, said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, in a report to Council. The Tertiary Planning process would also allow staff the opportunity examine the potential location of entertainment uses in the area, which would assist in achieving the Promenade's vision.

Last week, however, Councillors voted to hold off on going forward with this plan, citing reasons ranging from the \$70,000 price tag, as well as timing with so many other plans related to this area of Aurora, including the recently approved Community Improvement Plan (CIP), and the as-yet-incomplete Cultural Master Plan still fresh.

I think we have a number of initiatives on the go and, for myself, I would like to see us maintain our focus on those before us, things like the Community Improvement Plan, said Councillor Michael Thompson. We still have a lot of debate and discussion around the Heritage District. We're still looking at some pieces to the Promenade Study and some of the conversations around that. I would like to make sure we're not moving too quickly off of them and onto our next initiative or next project, so I would actually like to push this out until 2015.

Similar views were also expressed by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, who questioned if delaying the development of a new tertiary plan would impact the other balls in the air, like the CIP. According to Mr. Ramunno, with Council's approval of the CIP, it is now a matter of waiting for business and property owners to apply for some assistance under the plan. Moving forward with the tertiary plan would not impact things one way or another, Mr. Ramunno concluded.

I don't see the need for doing this right now, but I think we should take care of the number of reports and projects that we have right now and we probably wouldn't get to this next year, he said.

Councillor Buck also supported delaying the development of the plan, but for wholly different reasons. With a plan addressing traffic north of Yonge and Wellington, that is a problem entirely of Council's doing, she said, noting traffic control measures in the northeast quadrant.

Although the incumbent Council removed the chicanes, which raised the ire of many neighbourhood residents, some obstructions remain.

We have done things that have created congestion and this Council has had an opportunity to correct those previous decisions, she said. We went some small way by removing the chicanes, but we didn't go all the way and we are still causing traffic congestion that, perhaps not all of it, could have been relieved if we hadn't taken the plans we did in the previous Council.

When questioned by some Councillors on whether Aurora's Planning Department would have the resources to move ahead with the Tertiary Plan, Mr. Ramunno told Council that his staff would be able to deal with the majority of issues related to land use, but a consultant would need to be called in to tackle road connections, transit linkages, and work with York Region transit on that front as well.

From that perspective, with staff resources already in place, Councillor Paul Pirri said there should be no reason in delaying things.

'I am not necessarily certain we should be pushing this off because we would be pushing things aside,' said Councillor Pirri. 'Mr. Ramunno has assured me at least that his department is fully capable of moving forward.'

Councillor Chris Ballard also expressed his support of moving ahead.

'I have concerns with spending \$70,000, but I think I have greater concerns with not moving ahead with the study' in particular, to allow for appropriate planning for future growth in that area,' he said, noting Mr. Ramunno's comments that part of the plan moving ahead would be public consultations that could be up to nine months from now.

Added Councillor Pirri: 'We have staff telling us they have the capacity to do the work now, but they are saying, 'let's not do this because we have too much on the go.' I personally don't understand that logic. We have the funds set aside to use for this purpose, no one during the budget process said we didn't want to move forward with this, this is what the funds are for, staff are telling us that they have the capacity to do this, so why would we not move forward and do this work?'