

Promenade Plan designs delayed after calls for creative alternatives

By Brock Weir

Aurora business owners looking forward for more concrete details of the Aurora Promenade Plan will likely have to wait for word from the next term of Council.

Councillors voted to delay making tentative steps last week towards a multi-million dollar plan to improve streetscapes in the Yonge Street and Wellington Street corridors last week. Recommendations stemming from the previous week's General Committee meeting called on Councillors to give the thumbs-up to a \$2 million plan to start beautifying the streetscapes in key business areas, while the details would come under further review and funding in next year's budget process.

Although Councillors agreed much work needs to be done to overhaul some of the older business areas along the town's two busiest corridors, many balked at the cost of the \$2 million plan to replace existing sidewalks in this area with concrete pavers, and install new planters and "heritage" street furniture.

Councillor Paul Pirri was the first to speak out against the sidewalk plan. Aurora should look to more creative solutions on how to use sidewalk and shoulder areas, he said, taking a leaf out of San Francisco's playbook. There, they use temporary sidewalk extensions seasonally in their downtown areas to create more space for businesses, such as cafes, to operate.

"They normally have a certain amount of sidewalk space and come the weekends, people brought out wooden platforms to create new floor space to put cafes out on the main strip," he said. "It helped with foot traffic in the area as well, and I think that is a novel solution that helps beautify the core."

"When I am looking at having to spend \$2 million for putting in patterned concrete pavers, I think we can do a better job with less money to come up with novel solutions. Not everything in the promenade plan is gold. There has to be some instances where we can evaluate it and say we can do better."

Councillor John Abel said he agreed, but pointed out it will likely become a scenario the 2014-2018 Council will ultimately have to make. Putting forward \$2 million on pavers is a first step he said he would "never support" and added further thought needs to be given to creativity including measures to help trees thrive in urban streetscapes.

Putting the \$2 million aside, Councillor Michael Thompson said these objections should point to a greater review of the promenade plan overall.

"Maybe the proper thing to do is re-look at the streetscape design plan and if we would rather see other initiatives to achieve the look or design that will help revitalize the downtown," he said, before Councillor Wendy Gaertner noted her support of taking a second crack at the Promenade.

"I think there are other ways to achieve some boldness down there without bearing that cost," added Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. "As I said last week, maybe cut down a lane on each side [on Yonge Street] and extend that sidewalk area and give them some summer space. Maybe it is a temporary solution [but] going back and re-looking at this with some different eyes may be a good thing."

Other Councillors, however, were not so sure giving the plan another review was the right way forward, including Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said she did not want opportunities to be lost with a delay.

"We need to revitalize our downtown," she said. "We all feel the same way, but we don't seem to want to move anything forward and put a stake in the ground. I am disappointed we are going to continually send it back. We need to invest in this Town and if we're not going to spend the money, we're not going to revitalize, which we all say we want to do."

The most vocal opponent to sending the plan back to staff was Councillor Chris Ballard, who helped lead the charge as a citizen at

large during the last Council term to make the promenade plan a reality. He said it was time for Council to either 'fish or cut bait' on the Plan.

'[The recommendation] is saying what we have been saying all along, which has been in the Plan from day one, that we have to move this into our capital plan to start working on it,' he said. '18 months out, if we continue to dicker and put this off, it will be 20 more years and our downtown will have crumbled to dust and people will be pointing their fingers saying there was another plan, more money, all wasted. We can talk about priorities in what goes first, but let's get this thing moving, for heaven sakes!'