

Promenade Plan would overhaul sidewalks, but Councillors question cost, timing

By Brock Weir

By 2017, Aurora's main thoroughfares could be more attractive for a leisurely stroll or a shopping spree if a new plan to spruce up the Aurora Promenade is approved this week.

Councillors are due to improve this week an implementation plan to overhaul the Aurora Promenade streetscape, covering a large swath of Yonge Street, in a plan which has been nearly a decade in the making. In this first phase of the plan due to be approved, nearly \$2.8 million will be earmarked over three years for the overhaul of sidewalks from traditional concrete stones to patterned concrete markers, heritage style street furniture like benches, banners promoting the Downtown core, and a further \$80,000 for improved on-street planters and the plantings to go in them.

The plans were given the green light at the committee level last week, but some Councillors objected to the price tag.

Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, questioned whether business owners alongside the sidewalks slated to be ripped out had been consulted over any possible interruptions to their businesses. Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation said there hadn't been specific consultations related to the plan before Council, but more of an emphasis on the wider promenade plan. Businesses owners would be advised, however, of possible disruptions should the plan gain approval this week.

Unconvinced, Councillor Thompson said he was still in search of a compelling argument to spend \$2 million of public money out of capital reserves.

There is no question that it is a lot of money, said Mr. Ramunno. It would be difficult to identify the return value [of the money] apart from the vision set out in the Promenade to revitalize the downtown and create a beautified street scape on this stretch. Apart from creating that unified street scape between the curb and the buildings it is a really difficult question to ask.

In response, the Councillor said he was in support of some of the recommended improvements on the table but had no appetite to spend \$2 million on the fixing of a sidewalk.

I would rather see some of that money allocated to a [Community Improvement Plan] and then try and figure out a way, as people invest and redevelop their sites or their store fronts, to try and align it in that sense. I see more value that way than just repaving all of the sidewalks.

Looking for additional community support was also a priority for Councillor Paul Pirri, who questioned the appetite in the downtown community to establish a Business Improvement Area (BIA) to help fund some of these initiatives.

It is an idea that has been advocated for in the past, but never brought to fruition in the case of downtown businesses. Although Mr. Ramunno said that would be an option to examine in order to get some of the business owners to contribute to improvements, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe compared the situation to Newmarket whose own BIA generates roughly \$35,000 over the course of the year.

Although the plan was approved at the Committee level, others said they were keen on finding alternate ways to promote the plan. One suggestion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner was to use \$135,000 out of the Whitwell Donation Fund, which was established through a donation from Smart Centres when they constructed the Walmart plaza near Wellington and Highway 404.

This, she said, would allow the Town to acquire the heritage street furniture and planters, allowing some more time to see how things progress. Although her amendment didn't pass Committee, Dan Elliott, Treasurer for the Town of Aurora, indicated that while promenade improvements are not eligible for funding through Development Charges, alternate sources indeed include the Whitwell fund, as well as the Hydro Fund, and special taxes.

For Councillor John Abel, it was a matter of looking up for support.

‘The number is staggering,’ he said. ‘It is \$3 million coming from the taxpayers and this is one where I would like to see if Federal Funding can help us out [or get] a business partner before we proceed along these lines. I agree with Councillor Gaertner that we should move slowly and the first thing I would do is plant trees.’

Mayor Geoffrey Dawe too said he was ‘not crazy about the numbers’ but wanted to see something bold in the area ‘including changing lane restrictions on the historic core of Yonge Street to allow for outdoor patios. That wasn’t necessarily, he said, the top priority, but ‘really bold’ thinking was something which should be in play.

For such a costly endeavour, timing was everything for Councillor John Gallo and with a looming municipal election, the 2014 – 2018 Council will be saddled with carrying through on this Council’s decision.

‘My preference would be to leave it up to them to figure out how to implement it, but let’s just get it started,’ he said.