

Promenade plans delayed as Aurora finalizes capital budget

By Brock Weir

Plans for a revamped Aurora Promenade have been delayed after a heated debate at Council last week.

Streetscape designs for the Promenade, which includes stretches of Yonge Street and Wellington Street in Aurora's Downtown Core was the last item for Council to consider after finishing debates on the 2015 Capital Budget. While debates over the Operating Budget, the portion on the budget that has a direct impact on residential tax bills, is due to kick off next Monday, there was no shortage of debate on this item last Tuesday.

The streetscape design includes provisions like street furniture such as benches and planters, to make the area in question more pedestrian friendly and, in turn, give a boost to area businesses, but the primary bone of contention last week was the replacement of current pavement with patterned pavement to the tune of over \$2 million.

Although Council was only considering the design phase of the project at approximately \$200,000, the hefty price tag which could be coming down the pipe, pending further discussions, was too much for some to swallow.

Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, said he was expecting more information to come before Council by the time this year's budget deliberations rolled around that would be speaking to the financial implementations of the plan, but that was not what was there.

"I had serious concerns about the cost of sidewalks at \$2 million and I wasn't in favour of moving forward with it, and I still haven't seen the report," he said. "Without having that, I am not willing to move forward on this capital project conditionally, or as is. The report spoke nothing to the benefits of doing this. At the same time, we are talking about the Community Improvement Plan and the investment of business owners in re-facing and revitalizing the downtown core and how that kind of project provides a return on investment. I think that \$2 million could be better spent on other ways to revitalize the downtown than rebuilding sidewalks which, at the time of the report, really all was about a design and a look."

This was a view shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

"I am not interested in approving anything, conditionally or otherwise, until Council gets a more comprehensive report on this," she said.

Added Councillor Jeff Thom: "\$2 million for sidewalks is an outrageous amount of money. I haven't seen a report on this, so I have a hard time providing my consent on conditional approval or any approval for something that may or may not cost \$200,000, or \$2 million, or twenty bucks."

For Councillor John Abel, a more "wholesome" discussion of what should be done in the area, particularly at Yonge and Wellington, should figure into the debate before proceeding further. Although he too said he was not in favour of the \$2 million proposed for new sidewalks, noting he was not convinced that alone would bring residents "flooding" into the area, information was lacking.

"We should be very certain and confident in ourselves that something will be realised from it," he said. "I don't believe patio concrete is going to revitalize that corner. It is going to take businesses, restaurants, atmosphere, gatherings and that is where we should be looking, in my mind, and then we can finish off the streetscape."

Some, on the other hand, said they were in favour of going forward with the design at this point, comfortable there would be room for debate on the high ticket items once the design is complete and up for Council consideration.

"For me, the streetscape is very important," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "It goes right down to the revitalization of our

downtown core. I know there were some concerns with some of the areas of priority of what we wanted done?[but] I don't want this to stop. I don't want to defer it. We need to move forward. We talked about it a lot last year, so I am looking forward to that report.?

A similar view was offered by Councillor Paul Pirri, who said he did not understand Councillor Thompson's objections, stating a number of items have been approved conditionally pending further information.

?We're doing the exact same thing ? conditionally putting it on the table, earmarking it as something that could potentially go forward,? he said. ?If the report comes through and we don't like it then, we can turn it down.?

Exchanges between Councillors Pirri and Thompson got more heated as the debate continued with Councillor Pirri saying he believed ?people are afraid of conditionally approving something? and Councillor Thompson countering with a point of order objecting to the characterization of being ?afraid of action.?

?I don't know why we are getting so heated here,? intervened Mayor Geoff Dawe. ?We're looking at a conditional approval on a project that is \$200,000. We're not looking at anything else.

?We're not really discussing \$2 million for sidewalks. We're discussing?a conditional approval pending further information from staff. We're not talking about spending money with respect to the motion that is on the table.?