

Renewed talks could lead to hotel movement: Councillor

By Brock Weir

It's time to turn the page on debate swirling around the future of a hotel in Aurora and re-start the conversation.

At least, according to Councillor Michael Thompson.

Councillor Thompson is preparing a notice of motion for Council to re-start discussions around the local Council table about the future of a new hotel in Aurora after discussions at the Regional level hit a snag.

Recently, talks around the Regional table have focused on whether or not Regional development charges should be eased to encourage further hotel development in the area.

Hotel builders, according to staff reports at both Aurora and York's council tables have cited development charges (DCs), the amount paid by incoming developers to municipalities to account for future growth needs stemming from their developments, as a huge hurdle in making hotel investments.

Mayor Geoff Dawe expressed dismay that despite his efforts to get the Region to follow Aurora's lead in slashing development charges for hotels at the municipal level, the status quo remains, a situation they are trying to fix.

'There was some confusion at the Region as to what the process in Aurora had been,' said Mayor Dawe last week. 'Our DC bylaw was a differential from the hotel charge versus what would be the equivalent (DC) of an office of a similar size, so it wasn't an entire DC deferral, but a portion. There was some confusion at the Region as to what that was, so it has gone back to the CAO for clarification and hopefully they will see the wisdom in our request [for] that deferral.'

While Mayor Dawe said he anticipated more information coming forward in June, he told Aurora's Economic Development Advisory Committee earlier this month, however, that Regional Councillors did have a buy-in on some of the principles surrounding a DC deferral.

'I made a point that 50 per cent of a reduced DC on a hotel that gets built is a whole lot better than 100 per cent of the DCs on a hotel that is not,' he said. 'There was certainly a general buy-in on that,' said Mayor Dawe. 'The Region is concerned about opening up the Development Charge Bylaw because there are a number of other issues. We need to work with them and members of Council to say we're not looking at opening up the whole Development Charge bylaw, which would indeed be a can of worms, but a specific deferral on what really is a very minor piece of their development charge income.'

According to Councillor Thompson, however, there needs to be a wider conversation about hotels beyond development charges. Speaking to the Regional Report on last week's Council agenda, Councillor Thompson said there had been enough 'finger-pointing' and it was time for 'proactive' discussion. A column recently written by Mayor Dawe on development charges created a 'negative' impression in the hotel community and the page should be turned.

'To be honest, I am not comfortable with the narrative that is out there,' he told Council. 'I see columns in the paper that talk about it being a significant barrier, so if you Google 'Aurora' and 'hotel development,' the narrative is negative. Do we really want to be sending a negative message? I would much rather have a conversation around this table and change the narrative to a more positive one whereby Aurora is willing to work with the hotel community and try and figure it out.'

The issue has to be larger than just DCs, he said, adding there has been a lot of talk around the table, but not a lot of talk about strategy.

As the discussion wore on and became more heated, Mayor Dawe and Councillor Thompson traded words on whether DCs were the

sole issue standing between Aurora and a hotel. Mayor Dawe argued that yes, that was the case according to the hotel industry, while Councillor Thompson disagreed.

'In my opinion, we have to be more reactive than proactive,' Councillor Thompson told The Auroran. 'People come to us and then we start dealing with the situation, but I would like to see us be a little more proactive and have those conversations about what we can do to attract more people to come to Aurora and investigate if Aurora fits them. What are we not doing that we should be doing? I would like to see more people come to our door and us having those conversations about what do you need? My personal opinion is it is also partly the operational costs.

'Everybody has to have a bottom line, so if it is the occupancy rate what can we do to help show off Aurora and the things we are doing with sports tourism and all those other initiatives we are talking about to give them a level of comfort that their occupancy rate is going to be better than what they think it is, which in turn makes it more profitable.'