

Revitalization, business growth part of Mayor's 2017 vision



By Brock Weir

So, they stole a bit of his thunder.

When Geoff Dawe prepares each year to stand before members of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce for the annual Mayor's Luncheon, he usually has a few big business announcements up his sleeve to wow the crowds. This year, however, the cat got let out of the bag a bit early with the announcement Microtel Inn & Suites plans to build their flagship hotel at Eric T Smith Way and Goulding Avenue near Leslie and Wellington Streets.

"[Area businesses] are obviously very happy it is going forward," Mayor Dawe told The Auroran ahead of his Chamber speech. "I am quite surprised at the number of people who have commented to me since the hotel was announced [impressed] that we're getting a hotel. Obviously a lot of people were watching for it."

Mayor Dawe says the process of securing a hotel has been ongoing since 2012 and it has taken a while for all the pieces to fit together. The most important of these jigsaw pieces was addressing previously exorbitant Development Charges levied on hotel developments by the Region of York.

Recently, the Region passed a new DC bylaw for hotels bringing the price for square foot down from \$40.31 to \$7.95.

"For this development going in, it represents a little over \$1.5 million in terms of costs they will not incur," says Mayor Dawe.

Looking ahead to this week's Chamber speech, Mayor Dawe says he was struck by the increase of employment in York Region, which had seen an increase of 15,000 jobs by the middle of 2016. A contributing factor in this, he says, is land being less expensive for businesses in York Region.

It's a competitive market, he says, noting he believes this is also augmented by a frustration some commuters are feeling travelling into the city for work every day.

Citing Aurora's high ranking in the annual Moneysense survey of Canada's best communities to live, Mayor Dawe says one of the biggest challenges in maintaining Aurora's current ranking is housing prices.

"I just had an email from a developer the other day saying, 'Can you get us more land?'" he recalls. "People want to work here.

Aurora is still a very attractive community. We have managed to retain an extremely good balance of open space to developed space, and we're still in the 40 per cent open range. We're increasing our trail content and there have been some really good developments there in terms of how many additional kilometres of trails we will be adding over the next few years, especially the east-west trail through the former Highland Gate golf course, which will be off-road."

Maintaining that balance as Aurora reaches build-out will be a "huge challenge", he admits, but one which will be addressed through the development of Aurora's new Official Plan.

Another huge challenge will be maintaining "and drawing in" businesses to certain areas in Town. While Mayor Dawe says "People want to work here," getting those employment opportunities "businesses" in Aurora's Downtown Core is a challenge which proves perennial.

The development of the Town's Cultural Precinct Plan will hopefully make that challenge a little less onerous.

Nevertheless, calling it the 'Cultural Precinct Plan' is 'almost a misnomer' as it is all about the revitalization of Yonge Street, the historic Downtown Core, and making the area generally a more attractive destination. Movement towards a solution is now inevitable following Council's decision to raze the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street to make way for something new.

'I think by at least putting our stake in the ground [by making a decision] to tear those buildings down, then I think we have a clean slate,' says Mayor Dawe. 'I think we're getting over the hump. We have pushed the rock up the hill for quite a long time and I think we're over the top. There may be people who wish to go too quickly following that rock down the hill, but we have some reflective time in the process. We're still actively engaging the community and actively engaging the businesses in the area to see how it all fits together.'

There are many options on what could possibly be put in Library Square. Mayor Dawe cites the recent redevelopment of Newmarket's Old Town Hall as something that might be a good fit for the space. A theatre with tiered seating, or even an outdoor amphitheatre, would be a feature complementing existing amenities in the area.

When Mayor Dawe addressed the Chamber last year, he was keen on moving forward with his so-called 'Yonge Street Parking Plan' which would reduce Yonge Street to one lane of traffic in each direction in the historic core to allow for increased on-street parking.

Although that idea fizzled at the Council table, he has not yet given up hope.

'I am still very interested in that and I think it needs to be restructured,' he says. 'I had a long conversation with Ron Palmer, one of the principals of the Planning Partnership, and he is very keen on the whole concept of parkettes [for businesses to put out a couple of chairs for customers to relax] and things like that; how do you change that space to make it more liveable?'

'That was my goal. It wasn't articulated well, to be frank. His comment was you have a perceived parking problem, but you don't have a real parking problem. [The perception is] if I can't park in front of Caruso's then there is no parking there. But, you will park at the mall and walk much further. I don't know how you change that perception [that there's parking there behind Aw, Shucks or on the east side. The plan] was too focused on creating it as a parking lane as opposed to a parkette lane.'