

Strategic Plan will ease Aurora from a growing to mature community

By Brock Weir

Aurora's last few new developments are slowly but surely filling in but what comes next when the Town reaches build out? That is a question the Town hopes to address in its new 10 year Strategic Plan.

Approved by Council last week, it is a guideline on how Aurora can and will address the needs of an evolving community that is rapidly nearing the end of expansion. Once growth is complete, 'maturity' sets in and, with that, come a whole new set of issues the Town must grapple with.

Entitled 'Today, Tomorrow, Our Future Together,' the Strategic Plan outlines the vision for Aurora through 2031, namely: 'An innovative and sustainable community where neighbours care and businesses thrive.'

'Imagine an inclusive, growing, family-oriented community that retains its small-town charm and celebrates heritage, arts and culture,' reads the vision in the Strategic Plan, the culmination of nearly three years of public consultation. 'A place where friendly neighbours gather at community events and public spaces to enjoy a summer evening. An integrated community seamlessly connected by trails and open space that promotes green energy and provides accessible and convenient alternatives to driving through improved transit operations and mixed use development. A place with a stable and thriving economy that includes a mix of small and large businesses, access to local goods and services, employment opportunities for residents and a revitalized downtown core. This place is Aurora in 2031.'

Among the goals outlined in the Strategic Plan are working with the Region and Province to better transit and commuter traffic, including rapid transit, improving access to Highway 404, expanding east-west linkages, and studying traffic patterns with an eye to identifying areas of improvement.

Sustainable infrastructure is highlighted when it comes to growth, along with the continual support and review of cultural services, including those celebrating diversity and multiculturalism.

Active living is also an active component in the vision, and this includes a long-term needs assessment for recreation programs, multi-generational programming to address programs relevant to Aurora's aging population as well as the influx of young families, and programs that 'nurture' youth.

Of particular interest to recent debates surrounding stable neighbourhoods and what some residents perceive to be the rise of 'monster homes' is a target in the strategic plan to 'work with residents and stakeholders to protect and enhance the character of existing stable neighbourhoods when accommodating planned residential intensification' and examining intensification from the standpoint of its impact to the existing community.

Despite a campus of Niagara College's Canadian Institute of Food and Wine coming into the historic Aurora Armoury, the 2031 Strategic Plan renews Aurora's commitment to establish a further post-secondary presence for a research and training centre to 'promote the commercialization of technology, skills development and business and employment growth,' business incubators, and continuing to advocate for increased Aurora representation around the Regional Council table.

A plan such as this, however, is only as good as the follow through.

The Strategic Plan tasks staff in keeping these principles and goals in mind in delivering reports, as well as providing Council report cards on a semi-annual basis on how they are faring.

This reporting, however, was a source of discussion when the final Strategic Plan hit the Council table last week.

'I think [staff] have done a great job in revising it and continuing the work we started way back in the last term,' said Councillor Michael Thompson on getting regular status updates. 'This has been a challenge for us at Council. In 2014, we received a report card. In 2015, we received a report card and that's it. As we all understand, semi-annual means twice a year. It has been a bit of a challenge and in my conversations [with staff] we're trying to shift towards incorporating this into the budgetary process whereby the business plans outline the initiatives that are tied to the strategic plan that we're looking to do going forward, as well as providing a report on what we have achieved during that year.'

'I think that is sufficient: the check and balance for me is that every year we are staying on target with the Strategic Plan, that we're actually accomplishing something, progressing. I think it is important to do what we say. Maybe that should be taken out and, as discussed, expand upon it knowing that really the monitoring will happen during the budgetary process when we're looking at the business plans and they all get outlined.'