

Streetscape improvements in Aurora Promenade will be early focus of next Council

By Brock Weir

Beautifying Aurora's downtown business core has been a subject debated at Aurora Council for many years and, when the new Council is inaugurated in December, it is likely to be near the top of the Agenda.

Council signed off on a multi-year capital plan to improve the streetscapes in Aurora Promenade, an area which focuses on much of Aurora's commercial stretch of Yonge Street and portions of Wellington Street East and West.

They gave the green light on a series of initiatives, in principle, which are now part of Aurora's 10-year Capital Plan for future consideration, with an eye of getting many of these items off the ground as part of 2015 budget talks.

While the final tally of just what this will cost Aurora taxpayers will be up to the next Council, contingent of each bell and whistle ultimately approved, if the main priorities of the plan over the next three years are carried it, it could come to an estimated \$2.75 million.

Some of the priorities are in the lower cost \$40,000 range such as landscaping, the replacement of traffic light poles, and year-round hanging baskets on light poles, more costly initiatives include \$150,000 for promotional banners for Aurora's 'historic downtown', \$380,000 for a series of narrow planters and, the highest ticketed item, \$1.94 million for new patterned sidewalks.

Although Council ultimately approved the items in principle for consideration by whoever is sitting at the table at the end of the year, it was these new sidewalks which received the closest scrutiny around the Council table last week.

From the perspective of Councillor Michael Thompson, sidewalks would not be widened, they would not directly increase traffic flow, and replacing the sidewalk just for looks could not necessarily justify the cost.

'We have not defined the benefit,' he said. 'What is the overall impact or effect [on the plan] if you start taking pieces out of it? Show me the benefit. We're spending \$2 million to replace those slabs. We have a Community Improvement Plan (CIP) that says by investing in those businesses we will see a return on investment. We're only allocating \$200,000 to that. I think there is more benefit to the CIP plan than there is in just replacing those sidewalk slabs.'

'We continue to focus on the downtown, and rightly so. We need to find ways to help rejuvenate the downtown. While the plan does have components that support other initiatives that are going on, I am a little bit concerned because the sidewalks are part of that integral vision that is being proposed. I get concerned when we start pulling things out piecemeal without knowing the impact of the overall vision or plan.'

More comfortable with the plan was Councillor Sandra Humfries who highlighted economic development improvements that could stem from the plan, noting improvements such as these will bring people back into the Downtown Core, walking and shopping.

'This is just one aspect,' she said. 'It is a little condensed area that we want to make significant improvements on. We have talked about it for the past four years around the table, yet we are always hesitant to put some investment behind it. It is a significant amount of money, but I believe it will, at the end of the day, attract people [Downtown] and allow those businesses to attract individuals.'

While she agreed it might be time to put Aurora's money where its mouth is, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was not fully comfortable with putting these recommendations onto the next Council. Nevertheless, something had to give.

'At some point we're going to have to say, 'Yes, we're going to spend some money on this and we're not going to procrastinate

anymore," she said. "To me, that concern is not that we don't want to spend some money, but we still don't know what we want to do to revitalize the Downtown Core. I don't know what the answer is, but somehow it needs to stay in the capital plan, it needs to be presented and at least the idea is in the budget."

Another Councillor speaking out against the plan was Councillor Evelyn Buck. While she rejected the idea of the new sidewalks, she said she had "difficulty endorsing anything in principle" without a firmer idea of what the cost might be. That being said, she argued it was not the right time because the Downtown Core could now be on the cusp of some significant change; the Aurora United Church fire being something of a game-changer.

"We don't know what those changes might be and that might have a significant implication on any design," she argued. "[The fire] was a terrible thing to happen, but it is a catalyst for something different to happen. There are so many implications. Building fancy sidewalks is not going to make any difference. We desperately need to be open and not be wasting any time making plans for something which may be completely inadequate."