

Taxes, Town Square in focus during Chamber Q&A

Future tax rates and future benefits of Town Square were top of mind for the Aurora Chamber of Commerce last week when they hosted Mayor Tom Mrakas for his annual speech and luncheon with business leaders.

Held at the Royal Venetian Mansion on February 22, the Mayor sat down with Sandra Ferri, President & CEO of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce to answer just three pre-selected questions from Chamber members.

'Town Square completion has now been delayed until Spring of 2024,' said Ferri in her opening question. 'Can you provide an update on the cost, sponsorship, and when businesses can expect to see the benefits of the project?'

Mayor Mrakas said completion of the project had indeed been delayed due to 'a lot of labour shortages' and the rising cost of materials.

'We're about a year off from what we originally intended on the Square being up, so we're looking at late fall this year to the New Year,' he said, adding that Council the previous evening approved a \$1.2 million increase to the Town Square budget.

But Mayor Mrakas said the previous Council made the right decision to move forward with the project, then dubbed 'Library Square,' with the momentum being maintained by lawmakers today.

'I will always say we made the right decision at the right time because we're locking the pricing and we're able to make a major investment into our community, that our community needed. I think that anyone who has been in Aurora long enough knows that that is a decision that has been talked about for over 30 to 40 years and it is something the past Council made the decision to move forward and we're looking forward to great times ahead, especially in our Downtown Core and how the rate of return for all our businesses in the downtown. It's going to be incredible, exciting' and I will make sure we're all there in January with the grand opening.'

On the subject of rates, the next topic brought up by Ferri was Council's approval in early February of the 2023 Budget, one which resulted in a 3.5 per cent increase to the municipal portion of the residential tax bill.

'While taxes increased 3.5 per cent in these difficult times for business, we know that some municipalities are also looking at reviewing their revenue streams, including Development Charges [and] absent owners' levies,' she said, before asking whether the Mayor foresaw Council 'increasing or adding fees in the future.'

Replied Mayor Mrakas: 'I think we're always evaluating what we can do to, as I have always said, provide the best possible service at the best possible price, and what we're always looking at [is] can we do better? Can we find efficiencies in our budgets and within the corporation? The reality is that we're not the same as Toronto. Toronto has some other abilities for revenue creation through the City of Toronto. Other municipalities aren't as fortunate. I think we need to continue to work with the Province as well as with our federal partners to find new revenue streams for small and urban municipalities so we can actually keep our heads above water.'

'We collect nine to 11 cents of every tax dollar, yet we're responsible for over 60 per cent of infrastructure. It's an unsustainable model, so we need new revenue tools, we need new funding, we need help from the Province and the Federal government. I know municipalities in the past have advocated for one per cent of the sales tax to help municipalities move forward, but if we're not going to work together to find a solution to this, we have an unsustainable model currently and eventually we will get to a point where municipalities won't be able to continue to provide the services as we continue to grow and as our infrastructures start to crumble. That is the problem'and that is also part of what we see through Bill 23 from the Province, eliminating or reducing development charges in certain aspects. I have always maintained that that legislation is not going to create affordability or attainable housing. All it is going to do is shift that burden on to our residents and businesses. That's going to create problems as we grow, continuing to build those services that our residents and businesses need.'

The final question looked at development from a different standpoint: economic development.

"Economic development is key to the Town of Aurora," said Ferri, asking for more on the types of businesses the Town's Economic Development Board is focused on bringing into Aurora.

Mayor Mrakas said a Strategic Action Plan on economic development is in the works.

While he said people are starting to "notice the benefits" of moving their businesses to Aurora, help needs to also be in place for existing businesses.

"Our existing businesses shouldn't be struggling," he said. "We're trying to put in place many things that will help our existing businesses grow and that is also part of some of the investments that we're making as a Town, whether it is our rec facilities, whether it is the Town Square, you need to invest in the community if you want your community to grow and be successful" and we're doing that.

"We're taking those steps, we've taken that first step last term, and we're going to continue building upon that momentum and create an environment where our existing businesses will thrive and new businesses are going to be looking and actually pushing through each other to get here to open up their business here because they know the great talent and great community we are. I honestly wish everyone in this country could experience what it is like to live in the Town of Aurora because we are an incredible community and everyone deserves to be in an incredible community such as Aurora."

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