

'Think big and think local,' say Councillors on Precinct plan

By Brock Weir

Uncertainty has swirled around the revitalization of Downtown Aurora for over two decades but there is one thing Council now agrees on: it's time to think big and think local.

This is one of the key goals contained in the first 'milestone' of the 'rebooted' Cultural Precinct planning process, which is set to be approved at Council this week.

Local lawmakers approved the first milestone of the new process after, as The Auroran reported earlier this month, Aurora's new CAO, Doug Nadorozny, said it was important to call time on the project so far to get everybody - Council members, municipal staff, and residents at large - on the same page on where the plan has been and where it is going.

The first milestone, which was tentatively approved by Council members at last week's General Committee meeting, reaffirms the vision to 'Think Big and Local' while creating a 'hub of artistic creation, innovation, production and presentation' considering the context and scale of Downtown Aurora, enhancing pedestrian connections and rebranding the area as a 'destination.'

Approving the first milestone also includes a further look at a vision created by FOTENN Consulting, which has divided the community into three blocks. The first block houses the Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Public Library and Library Square. They call on demolishing the old Library and Seniors' Centre buildings for a number of redevelopment opportunities, including a proposal to extend the Church Street School/Aurora Cultural Centre northward to include an underground theatre.

The vision for the second block calls for the rejigging of parking at Trinity Anglican Church and the former Wells Street School while allowing for a pedestrian thoroughfare, while Block Three focuses on a number of overhauls to Town Park.

For Councillors, approving the First Milestone was a good next step, as was putting the future in the hands of the Town's planning department rather than the Parks & Recreation exercise it has been until this point.

That is where it should have been and I am optimistic that we can establish a Cultural Precinct and I am looking forward to that going as it should,' said Councillor John Abel.

Similar enthusiasm was offered by Councillor Jeff Thom who said he was 'happy' about the reboot.

'I think we are all interested in the revitalization of Downtown and even to move forward with the Cultural Precinct,' he said. 'On reflection on my role in this, I think this is the best way to move forward rather than the quick timeline we originally set ourselves.'

However, he stressed the FOTENN study remains a guideline rather than a vision set in stone.

'I look forward to a robust discussion with both Council and the public as to what we can really do to revitalize the Downtown and have a Cultural Precinct the whole Town can be proud of.'

Councillor Michael Thompson added he was 'fully supportive' of the report before Council and was encouraged that this will help the Town get to a point of making a decision.

'As we all know, this is something that has been on the Council agenda for many years and I think it is incumbent on this Council to make a decision on some of those long-standing issues,' he said. 'I am certainly supportive of the first milestone, which is those guiding principles and I look forward to the next stage.'

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: 'I am very happy to see this back and I think it is moving in the right direction. It is a plan to

give the residents in our Town hope that we are actually going to be implementing some exciting changes downtown. It will be a win-win, so every step of the way will have public consultations and I believe great decisions will be made to make it a place where everyone will want to go, a destination point.?

Some Councillors, however, questioned the second milestone which, according to the report, is set to hit the Council table on May 3. Of particular focus is the request to Council to commit \$5 million from Hydro Reserves as a ?notional budget? to implement the Cultural Precinct Plan.

?It is difficult to do a robust public consultation process and to look at the development community and other people that might have an interest in the plan without some notional agreement from Council that a large investment is prepared to be made by the community for the right project,? said the CAO, adding staff felt strongly it was important to leave the impression Council is prepared to spend ?big dollars? to make it happen. ?If the right project is never found, then the investment is zero. If a project we can't even envision is found and it is \$10 million, and that is the best one, Council can consider it then.?

But, that could mean another round of public consultation.

?I believe before any money is taken from any of the Hydro monies it has to go out to the public for approval as well,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner.