

‘To realize our potential we need to take action’ - Mayor tackles revitalization in first Chamber address



By Brock Weir

The word ‘revitalization’ can mean different things to different people but for Mayor Tom Mrakas, it is about achieving Aurora’s full potential and to realise potential, action needs to be taken.

This was the theme as Mayor Mrakas made his first speech to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce at the Chamber’s annual Mayor’s Luncheon on Wednesday afternoon.

Held at the Royal Venetian on Industrial Parkway South, he said the fact he was speaking to Chamber members at a venue within Aurora’s limits is a sure sign revitalization is well underway.

‘This revitalized venue is the embodiment of what our Council is trying to achieve: the revitalization of Aurora building on what was, on what is, to achieve what could be,’ he said. ‘It is just one example of the many revitalization initiatives that will bring increased prosperity to our community. We’re all here attending an event which, for the past few years, has been held in another municipality because we didn’t have a venue of adequate size to hold it here in Aurora. I believe it is a sign of positive things to come.’

There was a lot of optimism in his speech, including announcements that this year will see the implementation of 15 minute two-way GO Service between Aurora and Union Station, the construction of two hotels, along with the continued renovations at the historic Aurora Armoury to make way for Niagara College and the Canadian Food & Wine Institute (CFWI) and ongoing movement on redeveloping Library Square.

‘We hear every election, ‘revitalization’ and yet you never hear it defined,’ said Mayor Mrakas. ‘Revitalization means bringing new life or vigour to achieve the full potential of Aurora, building on what is to realise what could be. Aurora has incredible potential, but to realise that potential we need to take action. What we have here in Aurora is special and when I think of the future of our Downtown, I see Yonge and Wellington and our Cultural Precinct as a destination of huge potential. Our Downtown Core was the heart of our community, an economic hub of our Town for generations. Through revitalization initiatives, it is on its way to be that and so much more for generations to come.’

‘We are a diverse and vibrant community that celebrates our unique heritage and we can move forward towards a positive future by returning to our past and recognizing the critical role that Aurora’s heritage and historical core can play in our future economic growth. We are already moving forward to make that vision of a revitalized core a reality. Building on decades of work, this Council is poised to complete the work of previous Councils.’

Mayor Mrakas counts the renovations at the Aurora Armoury as ‘one of the most exciting projects happening in any municipality right now.’ The Town, he said, is excited to see the building, which was purchased by the municipality from the Federal government almost five years ago, restored back to its former glory.

It was a purchase made by Council, however, with the knowledge that it would be an ‘expensive’ project to renovate the building simply to bring it back up to code and, since its acquisition, there were a lot of talks on how to best use the space.

The last Council term saw a breakthrough to ‘breathe new life’ into the Downtown Core through a partnership with Niagara

College.

“Communities across this Province have been fighting to bring post-secondary institutions to their municipalities and Aurora is one of those municipalities,” he said. “Bringing a post-secondary institution to Aurora has been a goal in our strategic plan and something we have been working towards for a very long time. Over the last decade, the Town has met with countless colleges and universities in an effort to persuade them to set up locations in Aurora. Why? Because we know that post-secondary institutions bring jobs, visitors, and boost the local economy.

“During our last term, staff and Council were in discussions with Niagara College about expanding into the Greater Toronto market. When we shared with Niagara College our vision of downtown revitalization and the role that the Armoury could play in that, the representatives at the college were immediately on board. They immediately saw the potential that the armoury offered, the building's history and its location in the Downtown close to the GO station was ideal for them.

“Our vision for what the space could mean for our community aligned perfectly with their desire to be an integral part of the Town and be a part of something bigger than just a post-secondary institution. As home to the Canadian Food & Wine Institute, Aurora will see the Armoury once again become a vibrant community destination.”

The CFWI has a “genuine interest” in helping local businesses by partnering with them and providing opportunities for businesses to “build their teams and take advantage of the highly specialized training on offer,” Mayor Mrakas added, and they are “very much looking forward to becoming part of the community through supporting events, including future Christmas Markets.

“We know that investing in post-secondary facilities carries significant economic benefits,” said Mayor Mrakas. “We have seen that in communities like Brampton, Guelph, Oshawa and Kitchener, and it is why Vaughan worked so hard, and succeeded in getting a post-secondary institution within their community. It makes sense: financially, socially, culturally and economically. In talking to these other municipalities, we know this lease agreement with Niagara College and our investment in renovating the Armoury will pay off.”

The Armoury and the redevelopment of Library Square, he added, were “bookends that tell an exciting story” of downtown revitalization.

Next week: Mayor Mrakas' vision for the other bookend, Library Square.