

Tourism plan delayed as focus narrows

By Brock Weir

Aurora's tourism plan has been put on ice until at least November so Council can get a full picture on just what this ? and other plans already in the works ? might cost in the end.

The purpose of the tourism plan, the drafting for which was approved earlier this year by Council, is to examine ways Aurora can rebrand itself as a tourism draw, not just to draw people in from other communities, but also encourage residents to be tourists in their own back yard.

Council voted to mothball the plan, however, until they get down to business looking at the Town's 2016 Operating Budget, currently slated for November, and are able to home in on a specific vision.

The request to delay the plan was brought forward by Councillor Michael Thompson, a long-time proponent for such a plan. With myriad plans for myriad projects being drawn up within Town Hall, it is important to get a broad perspective on how all of these gears will turn together.

?I am concerned we have a number of different initiatives coming forward that we're all very much excited about and I just don't want to set up a scenario whereby we approve all this stuff and then, come budget, we have sticker shock and say, ?I am not accepting of the proposed increase',? said Councillor Thompson. ?I think for all of us we need to look and [ask] what are the priorities as we go forward because I think to adopt and add on new strategic objectives and initiatives there needs to be some trade-off if we're also going to meet the objective of keeping the [tax increase] to taxpayers at a reasonable level, as we have all committed to do.

?Looking at sports tourism and other aspects of tourism are good, but I am also mindful of all the other services and initiatives we're trying to bring forward. Where is all the money coming from??

Councillors signed off on the delay, largely agreeing a ?longer look? at all the components would be beneficial.

?I think that is fair and something I very much support looking at come budget time,? said Councillor Paul Pirri.

In the meantime, however, Council's recent talks provided a flavour of things to come as members cited some issues with what was before them.

The draft tourism plan notes 88 per cent of visitors to Aurora are day trippers, leading Councillor Wendy Gaertner to question how this factor would increase the attraction of a hotel investor to Aurora, something Council has already thrown its weight behind.

?Because we live such a close drive to so many very populated urban areas, it is really easy to get to us,? said Councillor Gaertner. ?I am not sure we would be a stayover destination other than for sport tourism.?

Special Projects Manager Jim Kyle, who helped lead the development of the tourism plan, said while the plan talks about attracting a hotel facility, the ?goal is to get people who are coming into Town for tournaments to develop a package to keep them in town for various events we have? including local restaurants and municipal fare.

?It is really to keep people in Town as long as possible and not to leave Town immediately [after an event],? said Mr. Kyle, adding they are collaborating with tournament organizers right now on such packages.

With one such tournament taking over Aurora soccer fields this past weekend ? the Aurora Youth Soccer Club's Stinger Cup ? sporting partners were also brought into the discussion, including Aurora Minor Hockey (AMHA). Councillor Jeff Thom questioned why the AMHA was not included in the development of the plan, despite their vast number of members.

The task force steering the plan was loosely based on the working committee to establish the Town's Cultural Master Plan last year, said Mr. Kyle. At the time, they invited all sports groups to participate but the AMHA did not respond to the invitation. The plan includes the establishment of a steering committee and anyone who wants to participate will have the opportunity to do so.

“Reaching out to Aurora Minor Hockey would certainly be a good idea and, perhaps as well to the Aurora Junior Tigers,” said Councillor Thom. “[That] could certainly be a draw for tourism as well.”

At the end of the day, however, when the Tourism Plan hits the budget table, Councillor Thompson said he is looking forward to a more concise path forward.

“There is a great opportunity for us to create an identity within Aurora and really focus on sport tourism,” he said. “I am not necessarily convinced with some of the other areas of tourism and the focus and I just don't want to see us be in all areas. I would rather see us be concentrated, find that niche that helps build that identity for Aurora. We wanted to create that identity that we're that hub within York Region for sports, for tourism, for attracting tournaments and so forth. We may be dabbling in every segment rather than focusing our efforts and our energy on one particular area.”