

Town Square, infrastructure and planning on the table in Chamber Q&A



Town Square is intended to be the 'centrepiece' of Downtown Revitalization.

The biggest Council investment in decades, the building project, which will see a significant addition to the historic Church Street School, to the Aurora Public Library and an outdoor gathering space in between, was a hot button issue at the Mayor's annual address to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce last week.

'We will continue to look at smart investments that better the quality of life for all residents and businesses for years to come,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas in his speech to the local business community before sitting down with Chamber President & CEO Sandra Ferri for a Question & Answer session.

'One of those investments, one I speak about very often, the largest the Town has ever undertaken and is currently underway: Aurora Town Square. The Town Square is coming to life: a gathering spot, a hub of activity. With great restaurants, arts and culture, our downtown will be a place where you can meet friends, study, work, go to a concert, take in a festival, enjoy a meal, shop, or just connect. We are building a community, building an experience, and building a great place where people can choose to live, work, visit, and where businesses want to call home.'

'We needed to act first. The investment in our community will spur revitalization and grow an enticing private sector to invest. We invested in our own community, creating a centrepiece and people are noticing.'

For business leaders who submitted questions prior to the event, the cost and timing of Town Square was a key priority - specifically zeroing in on whether the project will be delivered on time and on budget.

'We're a little bit behind schedule,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'We just had our last meeting and from a timing perspective we're a little behind. Budget-wise, I can confidently say we're still on track with our budget. Staff, our CAO, everyone - and Councillor Kim and Councillor Thompson sit on the [Financial Monitoring] Task Force - and we have been pushing everyone very hard to make sure we stay on track, stay on budget, but we all know there are pressures right now.'

'The material cost is skyrocketing, there are shortages in labour, and we're all saying that it was very good that this Council made the decision when we did to approve the project as we were able to lock in pricing. What we're seeing right across the Province, especially major projects that had a Class A estimate, not only have gone out to tender but [when] they come back they have seen a rise in that price, anywhere from \$5 million to \$20 million depending on the size of the project.'

"I commend this Council for the job they did. It was a difficult decision to make because we were right in the midst of a pandemic; there was some uncertainty, but we made that decision because it was the right thing to do. We're now able to look back at it and say it was the right time."

Infrastructure was another issue raised by Chamber members and delivered by Ms. Ferri.

One related to the development of Town Square is when northbound drivers on Yonge Street can expect the lane in front of the Aurora Public Library to re-open "the next couple of weeks" and the "reasoning" behind building a trail boardwalk on the southwest corner of Yonge Street and St. John's Sideroad when a sidewalk stands just 20 feet beside it.

"If you read through our Trails Master Plan, the area was identified to have a trail," Mayor Mrakas responded, noting the boardwalk will be subject to an official ribbon cutting this May. "We decided to go with an off-road trail" sidewalk is essentially not a trail. Anyone who wants to walk through a trail, you don't want to use a sidewalk. This is an extension of the Willow Farm Trail".so that was actually approved by Council. It was a unanimous decision, we felt it was the best way to go forward with it, and when we look to the future, we look to how it is going to have [connectivity] to the northern new trails that are going to be on the north side of St. John's as well. It's much needed and when you look to the future you will see why it is much needed."

The eight-minute conversation also had time to touch upon the Mayor's recent motion calling on the Province to abolish the Ontario Land Tribunal. Ms. Ferri said the idea was greeted with "both support and apprehension" and asked if the Mayor had a "Plan B" if the Province decides to forge ahead with the Tribunal.

"I don't know that this is the best topic with a bunch of developers in a room," he joked, speaking to the audience gathered at the Royal Venetian Mansion on Industrial Parkway South. The Plan B, he said, would be to limit appeals to "errors of process" while still allowing municipalities to uphold their official plans.

"Once we have those guidelines and rules in place, let's follow them," he said of the Official Plan. "If you're looking for something more than that, provide a benefit to the community and the community would more than welcome that benefit and will allow for an exception. Without that benefit to the community, it should be up to us elected officials who know [the Town] to uphold our Official Plan."

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