

Vacant lot owners could face a tax hit to 'stimulate' development

By Brock Weir

Vacant lots dotting the Yonge Street landscape could soon come into focus.

Council approved a motion from Councillor John Abel tasking staff to investigate alternatives to how Aurora can tax vacant lots on what is often considered to be Aurora's 'main street.'

In his motion, he described these vacant lots, zoned for commercial uses, as 'neglected' and creating an eyesore to the economic viability of the area.

Other municipalities, he said, impose a higher tax rate on vacant lots to 'stimulate development', and Aurora should consider the implications of following suit.

'This was found to be effective [and] it stimulates as soon as we see something moving forward,' said Councillor Abel. 'Contrary to when you see something overgrown, it really doesn't help business interests.'

The motion caught the support of Councillor John Gallo, who said similar measures had been implemented successfully elsewhere. 'I believe we did this very thing along Industrial Parkway South and it stimulated a lot of those new condo units,' he said.

While Councillor Michael Thompson also said he supported the project, he said it should not be examined in isolation.

'We need to keep it in the context of a bigger initiative and strategy,' he said. 'If the desire here is to stimulate the development, let's focus on that, but it would also be nice within the context of the report to have other means and initiatives [that could be identified] to spur development.'

Dan Elliott, Treasurer for the Town of Aurora, said a report on possible tax measures could come forward over the summer.

Councillor Sandra Humfries, on the other hand, said communication is also important to explain why this might be coming down the pipeline, but Councillor Evelyn Buck questioned what might be at the base of the issue. In her view, there were four lots that could possibly come under this category, but each one is taxed.

'I know that each one of these lots is problematic as far as development is concerned, [but] we don't know who is coming to the planning department asking for advice on how they may develop a lot or what advice they are getting from the planning department, but I do know that three of those lots are problem lots.'

'Maybe we should be looking at acquiring those lots ourselves and making use of them that way.'