

Wanted: A designer to establish vision for Downtown Aurora's cultural precinct?

By Brock Weir

After nearly 15 years of discussion and delays, the future of Library Square could be determined through a larger vision for Aurora's Cultural Precinct.

Council has opened the doors to designers to make their pitch on what this section of Downtown Aurora should be and all it could look like, following a motion from Councillors Tom Mrakas and Michael Thompson last week. In their motion, the Councillors said the Aurora Promenade Plan, which guides the development and improvements along stretches of Yonge Street and Wellington Street, calls for big moves that will help achieve long-held objectives for the area, and a Cultural Precinct is one of them.

The Cultural Precinct concept, they note, is defined as three downtown blocks radiating out from Town Park. These blocks include such landmarks as the Aurora Public Library, the Aurora Cultural Centre, the old Aurora Armoury, Town Park itself, Trinity Anglican Church and the once-and-future home of Aurora United Church.

The establishment of a cultural precinct represents an opportunity to leverage the concentration of these cultural assets as an attraction, reinforced by additional facilities, enhanced public spaces, and distinct streetscape treatments.

The idea to cast a wider net to settle this issue came out of a Globe and Mail article highlighting the innovative work of a Toronto design duo turning anywhere spaces into some pretty amazing public spaces, said Councillor Thompson. In meeting with the team, the two Councillors said they were struck by the designers' approach to always start a conversation on how a project can contribute to the quality of life and experience in a community.

Their approach was really intriguing, said Councillor Thompson. As they walked through some of the things they have done in other municipalities, both of us thought this would be an excellent opportunity to try and finally come to a solution for Library Square. When they took a look at an aerial view of Library Square, they immediately took upon the notion it should be larger and should encompass Town Park and Armoury, without even knowing about the Promenade Plan and the Precinct area that is defined there.

Council's approval in opening up the doors to RFPs on downtown vision is an opportunity to create a concept plan of how to bring this to a reality and what it would look like.

To me, this is more of an action step, said Councillor Thompson. It is the first step to get this done so we can start having those conversations prior to budget so we can move forward and have some traction with this throughout this term.

Following Council's approval of the motion, municipal staff are now tasked with putting out the RFP to engage a design firm to establish a vision and conceptual plan for the Cultural Precinct area, which would then be presented to Council for consideration before the 2016 Budget process kicks off this winter.

While it got the green light, the plan received some hesitation from Councillor Paul Pirri who said he was cautious whenever discussions around the table focus in on conversations having taken place with just one organization that has expressed an interest in a project.

We are very much open to competition and I want to make that clear, as is always the case, he said. We are not hoping one organization gets it over another. I am very much aware of some other organizations that do the same type of work that are innovative.

Although Councillor Mrakas said they were very excited with what this one group gave to them within the space of an hour, they are open to all comers.

?I am sure any other design firm or company that comes forward, it would be the best proposal to move forward and I would be excited with whoever brings this proposal forward,? he said.