

?We have disappointed the community? on downtown revitalization: Councillor

By Brock Weir

Aurora has ?disappointed the community? on the revitalization of the downtown core and has to ?do better,? according to Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

The majority of Council hopes that a shift to what is hoped to be a more cohesive plan will go a long way into seeing some results. Last week, Council approved a motion from Councillor John Abel calling bringing together the multiple plans related to the downtown core ? including the Aurora Promenade Plan, the Cultural Master Plan, Strategic Plan, and Community Tourism Plan ? to develop a comprehensive ?Downtown Revitalization Plan through engagement, collaboration and communication.?

For many Council members it was an important step forward, but for nearly as many the motion was trying to re-invent the wheel. After a contentious debate, the motion was approved on a 5 ? 4 vote.

?Without a plan you can't obtain a vision. If we have a vision to revitalize it ? and it is clear that we do ? then we should go ahead with making a plan,? said Councillor Abel. ?In short, that is what I am bringing forward. There is a buy-in from our community partners. When we come up with an idea it is good to know how things fit in. A vision without an action is a daydream and an action without a vision is a nightmare. You don't want to be doing things and then realising that it was the wrong decision and you didn't have all the information and a plan in front of you.

?We need to incorporate all of these ideas if we're going to attract business, buy-in from your community and progress and move forward. We need to come forward with a downtown revitalization plan.?

From the perspective of Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who was on Council when the Aurora Promenade Plan was approved, focusing on the Yonge and Wellington corridors, there were ?a lot of expectations? when it came forward in 2010 ? but little action.

?I was going over my old, and some recent emails over the weekend and there is a lot of disappointment and we need to do something about it,? she said. ?We're talking about a whole six years. I don't know what the answer is, but we're going to have a new economic development person, we're going to have a Board. I definitely think downtown revitalization should be a priority and I think it should be a priority for the rest of our Council term.?

A similar view was offered by Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who said Aurora has a number of good planning documents in place, each pulled together with community input, but they need to be brought together.

?This is pulling together those plans and articulating almost a roadmap of where do we want to go and where do we want to see things evolve,? said Councillor Humfryes. ?I can see it be a plan over the years, but we can see it evolve and it takes a while to bring these plans to fruition.?

Added Councillor Jeff Thom: ?I see this as a direction to staff to look at what we have already and try to get this stuff going and putting an exclamation point behind this Council's desire to declare that this is a big priority for us. I don't see it as being redundant necessarily or ordering staff on a wild goose hunt. I think we can work with what we have already and this puts that exclamation point behind it.?

Others, however, said they believed the motion did indeed send staff on a wild goose chase or, in short, was simply ?redundant.?

?I see this as repackaging what we have been discussing for six years and has been said many, many times, be it the Promenade Plan or other plans that have been identified,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?They all speak to downtown revitalization. Staff have confirmed through our discussions that they do have a plan for downtown revitalization already and it is those reports, studies and reports that we have approved before.

?As we can all agree on, the challenge is with the implementation. We haven't done a great job of following through on all those different action items. That's the real challenge as opposed to having some sort of glossy document called the Downtown Revitalization plan that just repackages what we already have. The question is have we done a good job of implementing those policies and procedures that we have in place? The answer is no. That's where the focus should be, rather than repackaging what we already have.?

Councillor Tom Mrakas was of a similar mindset, saying ?everyone likes to use the buzzword ?revitalization.?

?Our Promenade Plan is, in essence, a revitalization plan for the downtown,? he said. ?The difference is we haven't delivered on that plan and that is what we need to do. We don't need to create another plan that we already have. We need to deliver and use what we already have and make some decisions. That is the path we started to take and we started to move. The Cultural Precinct was born from the promenade plan. The Promenade Plan speaks to that revitalization and renewal of the Downtown. That's what we need to do, not create another plan.?

Added Councillor Paul Pirri: ?Working in the field, I understand completely the value of having a Downtown Revitalization Plan. There is nothing Councillor Abel has mentioned tonight that is not already contained in one of our plans. It would be easy to ask why he wants to bring forward a motion that repeats something that has already been done. I am not going to do that.

?Are we endorsing his plan, or are we endorsing what we already have and what we're already doing? It irritates me we are working towards a goal together and we have a rogue Councillor saying there is no vision other than their vision. I take serious offence to being told that all of our work, all last term of Council's work, is not downtown revitalization but Councillor Abel is going to bring forward this new plan. I think we need to take stock of what we have already done and move forward.?

Voting in favour were Mayor Geoff Dawe, Councillors Abel, Gaertner, Humfries and Thom. Voting against were Councillors Harold Kim, Mrakas, Pirri, and Thompson.