

Economic Development Board rolls out 'ambitious' plan for Aurora

It has been a difficult year for business, and it will be a difficult time for the foreseeable future, but Aurora's Economic Development Board is set to begin implementing its strategic plan this year.

Members of the Board presented their implementation plan to Council at last week's General Committee meeting, one that is focused on attracting business investment, retaining and helping existing businesses grow and expand, revitalize the historic downtown core, and engage with people to 'continue to build a high quality of life and opportunity.'

The plan is driven by those four primary pillars and will get underway with meeting local businesses and building programs and services to support their needs.

'This is critical,' says the Board's Lisa Hausz on business retention and expansion. 'The key is knowing what businesses are here, who are the people behind those business signs and what do they need in order to be successful. Traditionally, the easiest way to do that is to ask and be right in front of them. In light of COVID, of course, the face-to-face has been challenging if not absolutely unable to do.'

But the Board is adapting. This work, until in-person engagement is more practical, will be carried out via survey 'both traditional and online' and the results will help guide the work going forward.

'Supporting, encouraging and revitalizing Downtown as a main street is a theme in economic development circles, especially now with the impacts of COVID. Through the [Board's] downtown subcommittee, a business survey has been drafted and will be part of what is called 'trriage business assessment' report,' she continued. 'We're referring to it as a business survey, but it is really a lot more than just a business survey. It really needs to dig into the needs, the wants and the ideas of the downtown businesses.'

'The survey tool will allow us to understand the needs of the local businesses while allowing them to engage with the committee, staff, Council and those of us [who] have the ability to make local changes, programs and initiatives to help them have the most impact. We want to ensure we have their voice when we are creating these types of services.'

These include Support Local campaigns, which the Aurora Chamber of Commerce has been spearheading since the start of the global pandemic, further promotion of Aurora's downtown patio program, and more.

All of this leads to the enhancement of quality of life.

'This is a huge goal section with many areas of focus,' she said. 'We have selected a couple of areas that we can focus on at least for the short term, particularly in workforce development. This ties nicely in with the other three goals and the information and data needs of the other sections. For instance, in attraction and retention in the downtown, we all need people. They all rely on people and the talent and an ongoing strong workforce in order to be successful. We want to attract talent, keep the amazing talent we have here, and continue to support them through training and other services.'

Integral to all of this, however, will be setting targets for the types of business the Town wants to attract and where they should be located. Part of this component will be a review of employment lands and a target sector analysis, which is due to be presented, at least in part, to the Board and Council this spring.

'The goal is to be a key location for businesses to invest, grow and add to the Town's employment,' said Ms. Hausz. 'There are new tools and communication pieces that are in the works that are directly related to [this]. It will be a resource document regarding the employment targets, key sectors we will be focusing on through our marketing and outreach, and we will be excited to bring that forward. On the note of marketing, we are updating materials to respond to investment inquiries and we'll also be creating a lead management that will help us better track and communicate not only the needs and requirements of the investment but which ones

are we actually landing and if we are losing any investments, what are those reasons and we can take a look at??

The plan update was warmly received by local lawmakers last week who put particular focus on business retention and expansion.

Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, sought assurances that despite COVID measures that businesses were still on the receiving end of virtual visits to ensure businesses stay engaged.

?I certainly know over the years the challenges of the implementation of the program, but when we have gone out and done it and made that contact, it has proven to be very valuable,? he said.

Councillor Wendy Gartner noted her support of the plan, while Councillor Rachel Gilliland wanted further information on new data that would come out of upcoming surveys.

?COVID is probably going to change some of the data we have right now,? she said.

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: ?I think we're really moving in the right direction. The Board has done some tremendous work. I can't wait until this Council gets to look at that target sector analysis. It is quite impressive the amount of work that was done in-house and what is going to be coming in the future roles for this Town when it comes to economic development.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter