

Financial incentives could form Community Improvement Plan

By Brock Weir

Visibility and vacancies are two key considerations Aurora should keep in mind before establishing a Community Improvement Plan, according to local building and business owners.

Business and property owners sounded off in a series of meetings intended to gauge public input in developing a Community Improvement Plan focusing on Downtown Aurora.

According to planners, a Community Improvement Plan (CIP) looks to encourage redevelopment within specifically targeted areas, whether it is through municipal grant or loan programs to business and property owners, or other incentives to get people back into and re-investing in Aurora's flagging main corridor.

Referring to the Yonge Street and Wellington Street corridors as 'Aurora's commercial spine', consultants retained by the Town said it is important to develop a CIP that offers 'a suite of financial incentives tailored to address the specific developments and investment needs and opportunities of the Promenade.'

'It is a framework which offers a suggested guide for public actions and development as well as private,' Kimberley Wilmot of Sierra Planning and Management, told a group of stakeholders at the Aurora Seniors' Centre. 'The key thing is we are fitting in with existing policies to meet the objectives for redevelopment in the area. We want to support the official plan objectives for this area, create a mixed use environment, a vibrant economic, social and cultural hub, and address the revitalization needs.'

The ideal plan, said Ms. Wilmot, has the ability to support heritage planning and preservation, particularly in the Downtown Core, but also foster new planning. They envision a wide range of grants, loans and incentive programs slated for each area, for strict areas of time, to stimulate private sector property owners, with applications to be screened either by Council, town staff, or an appointed committee, and targeted program for specific neighbourhoods that dot the Aurora Promenade.

'We will be doing a policy review and getting to know the businesses in the community better,' she said. 'If we don't design the programs right away, and the CIP is not designed in the right way, it will not be an effective program. What will help this project is we must create programs that the business community wants. If not, it is not going to create the traction we want it to have.'

About a dozen interested members of the public attended each of the meetings, the first targeted to property owners and developers, with the second session tailored to business owners. There, members of the public provided a wide range of ideas and concerns.

Among them were strategizing on how to fill Yonge Street's vacant storefronts in the heritage stretch of Yonge Street. Some expressed concern that there needs to be more done than simply providing pretty landscaping and stringent sign guidelines in the area, as proposed by a big chunk of the Aurora Promenade Plan, but more practical things needed to be done to ensure visibility and accessibility.

Once visibility is straightened out, high on their priority list was finding a way to make the Downtown Core the draw it once was, figuring out the best ways to make it a 'destination' whether it is building public gathering spaces or providing something more elaborate.

'We need something to draw people in,' said Councillor John Abel at the first session. 'When we draw people in, it can support businesses, culture, and be cyclical. I am seeing grant applications as a means to making improvements to properties, but I think it has to go further than that.'

He also ventures a novel idea for galvanizing property owners with languishing store fronts to fill those spaces.

'In other towns to create development, you tax [vacant buildings] three times or four times the amount of a property that is being

occupied," he said. "Suddenly, that person realises that is a heavier burden and that is an incentive to get them to the table to talk about development or selling their property for development."



Now undergoing extensive renovations is the old Thompson's Furniture Building. Aww, Shucks! restaurant is overhauling the building before moving into their new digs this summer and surrounding business owners hope it will help revitalize the area. Auroran photo by Brock Weir.

In order for any of these programs to gain traction, however, the consultants said it is important for business owners, property owners, and the public alike to see them in action. The most immediate and effective way to achieve this is a façade improvement program to help property owners spruce up their storefronts, they said.

"If they're not seeing the change, it is not going to yield the response we would like," said Ms. Wilmot. "Programs like the façade improvement programs tend to be the ones that get it going. It's popular, it shows immediate change to a physical area, and it almost always promotes itself."

According to Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, the next steps in this process before a possible implementation of a CIP is to consider the public input and bring back a report to Council for consideration. Good discussions were had at both sessions, he said, adding there was also a voice for better parking downtown.

"They would like a stronger voice in directing new residents to our downtown that there are thriving businesses downtown," said Mr. Ramunno. "They are there and they hope that messages can get out with respect to improved signage, dealing with identifying the existing parking supply we do have. We did some of that work a couple of years ago when we were doing the promenade and identified we have got over 700 parking spaces within that Yonge and Wellington quadrant and we think we're going to re-issue some of those fliers as well identifying to the business owners that we do have a pretty good parking supply downtown."

Mr. Ramunno added before a report is presented to Council, possibly as early as this fall, more consultation and notification will take place, as well as the continued collection of online surveys, and consultant interviews throughout the community.