

Museum charts course for next four years with new home in mind

Museums often look backward, but the Aurora Museum & Archives is very much focused on the future.

Last week, curator Shawna White presented to Council the museum's plan through 2025, one which will see them grow physically within its new home within the Library Square complex as well as expand its reach through the community as a whole.

“Many people believe my role is confined to the past, the history of the community, but one must acknowledge that yesterday is history and to be truly robust and relevant means that I must be aware of what is happening in the community in order to preserve, promote and present the vibrancy and change as it happens,” said Ms. White.

The multi-year plan as presented looks at four key factors that will define change as it happens: access, collections management and conservation, partnerships, and programs and outreach. The plan contains 15 strategies and 50 action items through to the middle of the decade.

The ultimate goal of this first pillar is to increase the community's access to the collection.

Since the temporary closure last year of the Church Street School for the duration of Library Square's construction, Town Hall has been the Museum's nerve centre. Although the building is unable to open to the general public due to ongoing restrictions related to the global pandemic, increasing access to the collection is already underway within those red brick walls on John West Way.

Last year, the Museum transformed a wall outside Council Chambers into a mural exhibition on the Queen's York Rangers, and plans are now afoot to translate their previous exhibition, The Wardrobes of Aurora, into a mural and artefact space on Town Hall's second floor showcasing textiles, shoes and other items from Aurora's closets that now reside within their collection.

Collections and Management will be a “vital” area going forward as the Museum looks towards its new digs at Library Square. Once complete, Ms. White says the archives will be housed in a new facility with a glass wall that will allow visitors not only to see the archives themselves, but conservation efforts in action.

As these efforts continue, partnerships between the Museum and community organizations are set for an expansion. These partnership efforts came into sharp focus in February for Black History Month as the Museum collaborated with members of the Aurora Black Community Facebook group for a series of virtual commemorations. This will continue with their planned new exhibition, Journey to the Crossroads, which looks at immigration from its earliest days through to the 2000s.

Ms. White's plan was received warmly by Council, but it did not come without question.

Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, focused in on the Museum's proposed budget through the next five years, including plans to bring on an additional staff person in 2022 to expand education, programming and outreach. As such, he asked when the Museum plans to grow revenue.

In response, Ms. White says they currently are unable to do school programming due to space and staffing issues, and they presently “have no baseline” on revenues.

“I don't want to pull figures out of the air based on nothing,” she said. “There will be corresponding revenue and that will be our only revenue line. The Museum is a service that is provided, much like the Library. There is no cost to residents to come in and see, but there will be costs for formal programming. The position is to bring that programmer in to develop the programs.”

But the Councillor contended it “is not a bad thing” to look at revenue projections over a five-year horizon.

"I get it, it's a shot in the dark, but it is always good to have targets," said Councillor Thompson. "I think if we have a number there it gives us a goal to reach at. I hear you when you say it is a service [like] the Library, but when I sat on the Library Board, I still challenged the Library Board to grow revenue, even if it was just incremental in any which way because, at the end of the day, revenue you're able to generate means it is less of a requisition from the taxpayers."

He also asked the Museum for key performance indicators (KPIs) over the next five years to "gauge the effectiveness or success" of what the Museum is trying to achieve.

"KPIs, to me, are so broadly worded and I am not sure I necessarily agree with just broadly using that word," said Ms. White. "I would rather come up with specific actions and plans that are measurable, that you can look back: did we do what we said we were going to do rather than coming up with increased attendance by X amount or whatever because I can't measure that. We don't have ticket sales, we don't have a counter that comes in. It is open. I have to measure by my actions and by what we do as a museum. I can take a stab at KPIs, but I think it is much more productive to judge me and the museum by these action items—how much we realized and how we did what we said we were going to do."

Councillor Thompson's sentiments, however, were shared by Councillor John Gallo who said that while the "museum has certainly gone a long, long way" it was "hard to grasp the return on investment."

"It is hard to grasp the return on investment on these types of things because they are cultural in value and the value to the community is very hard to pinpoint to a dollar," he said.

Added Mayor Tom Mrakas: "I think every single person around this table looks at how we can make sure we're providing the best possible services and the best possible price. We're always looking at what we can do to save taxpayers any money, but I think when we look at our heritage there is an immense amount of value that sometimes you can't put a value on because we need to continue to preserve and protect that heritage. People say you need to know where you've come from to know where you're going. That's important for our Town."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter