

New Cultural Action Plan given tentative green light

As the opening of Aurora Town Square nears this fall, a new Cultural Action Plan to help both this project and the cultural sector thrive, is nearing completion.

Council this month gave the tentative green light to Aurora's new Cultural Action Plan.

Designed to help guide cultural development and planning within Aurora through 2028, it builds upon the Town's first such plan from 2013.

With final approval expected to come at Council's meeting on May 28, the Plan (CAP) is focused on nurturing, sustaining and preserving the diversity of cultural elements that enrich the life of Aurora.

The Cultural Action Plan includes nine objectives that are paired with numerous Key Results that will help track progress towards achieving each objective, said Phil Rose, Manager of Cultural Services for the Town of Aurora, in a report to Council.

Elaborating on the objectives to local lawmakers at Council's Committee of the Whole meeting on May 7, Rose was joined by Nichole Campsall, the Town's Cultural Development Coordinator, to outline the objectives.

The first objective is to align the plan with Aurora's Truth & Reconciliation efforts.

Indigenous considerations will play a significant role in the facilitation of the Cultural Action Plan, said Campsall. Further to this, we plan to implement an inclusive classroom at Town Square. We will be modelling this after the inclusive classroom at the Community Safety Village in Stouffville, which includes wall hangings, artwork and resources representing diverse communities and voices, including Indigenous teachings. This room will be home to our education programs. Our goal is that every community member who joins us for a program or event feels at home and represented in the space. It is important to ensure that Indigenous components are an integral part of Aurora Town Square all year long. We plan to increase Indigenous participation in events, programs and exhibitions as part of the plan.

The second objective is, according to Rose, to develop creative innovation opportunities.

Through the development of the Plan, Rose said a number of different individuals voiced the need for space and resources for creative professionals and entrepreneurs.

One of the first things we want to do as part of Objective 2 is to gauge the feasibility of either programs or physical space that will serve as a community hub for local artists, creative entrepreneurs, to allow them to create network, share resources and foster collaborative efforts, he said.

The third objective is to use Culture Days, which runs from mid-September through mid-October each year, to increase awareness of local cultural groups and demonstrate their value to Aurora.

We will allocate an annual budget to support Culture Days, said Campsall. We will continue to review and evaluate Culture Days programming by Q4 annually to ensure continued improvement and success. Beyond this, we intend to increase the heritage experiences that are offered during Culture Days to the Aurora Museum & Archives.

The fourth pillar is to map cultural resources throughout Aurora to showcase the sector.

This will, says Rose, create a database of people, places and organizations that are rowing in similar directions.

?The map is really meant to show where the concentration of cultural resources are in your community, so when you're making decisions on where to invest in your creative economy, you have an understanding of where your clusters of creative and cultural resources are.?

The cultural mapping element leads directly to Objective Five, which is to position Aurora as a destination for arts, culture, heritage and tourism within York Region and beyond.

?Here, we think there is, now that we have hospitality infrastructure, now that Town Square is about to open, we anticipate there is going to be revitalization downtown,? Rose continued. ?We have seen some new restaurants and different businesses around Town open up and there is the potential for cultural tourism experience packages.?

Packages, he added, would be developed with the Town's Economic Development team and could include accommodations at a local hotel, dinner at a local restaurant, and tickets to a show at Aurora Town Square.

?That will be a key priority with the implementation of the Plan,? he said. ?The other is to try and draw more national [and] provincial arts, cultural, heritage and tourism initiatives into Town.?

Objective Six is to increase capacity of the local cultural sector, including hosting a summit for the sector, while Objective Seven is to ensure the Plan ?remains strategically aligned with other related corporate plans.

The eighth and ninth objectives are to use cultural resources for downtown revitalization and to ?demonstrate that arts, heritage and culture play an instrumental role in enhancing Aurora's quality of life and supporting a vibrant downtown.?

?Supporting the revitalization of downtown is a key component of the cultural action plan,? said Campsall. ?Public art makes spaces welcoming, meaningful and strengthens communities. We plan to introduce public art to the Cultural Precinct to add visual beauty, connection and engagement to the Downtown Space. Further, we will contribute to the Promenade Streetscape Redevelopment design process and regularly meet with Economic Development and Downtown Business Community to ensure Town Square aligns with the revitalization efforts.?

Added Rose: ?Data does show the GDP impacts of culture to Aurora, what the economic development impact is to Aurora. We have never really been able to translate that data into anything tangible that paints the picture of how important culture is to our community from a quality of life and economic development perspective, so in addition to the data we gleaned from that program as well as gathering our own quantitative and qualitative data, again through conversations, being at the public and a rigorous data collection process, we want to be able to issue a Cultural Impact Report annually that lets Council know how the dollars we're spending on culture are having a ripple effect in the community.?

Ensuring it has just that effect was top of mind for Council during this month's discussions.

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson sought assurances that these objectives were already funded through the Town's 10-year capital plan and was told this Plan earmarks \$50,000 annually for implementation of the goals.

?This doesn't create any budgetary pressure,? he said. ?The delivery of all these services and initiatives will have no impact on the tax levy because we have already pre-approved from a capital perspective. There are no staffing requests, no increase budgets, that's what I take from the financial implications. I'm a little challenged because I think it is a great plan but I want to understand the financial implications of the report.?

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said Council had been ?waiting a long time? for the Plan to come out and she said what was presented was ?very robust.?. Nevertheless, she requested regular updates to ensure the goals outlined were met.

?I would like to see a report maybe on a biennial basis because we have to prepare for the budget,? she said, asking staff to ensure

that all applicable grants from upper levels of government are applied for in bringing this to fruition.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter