

Public input ?validates? nearly 20 years of feedback: Councillors



By Brock Weir

Knocking down the Victoria Street buildings that used to house the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre were themes that came to the forefront in breakout groups last week as nearly 60 members of the public came out for a roundtable discussion on the future of Library Square and Aurora's Cultural Precinct.

Hosted by Councillors Tom Mrakas and Michael Thompson, and attended by Councillors John Abel, Wendy Gaertner, Sandra Humfryes, Harold Kim, and Paul Pirri, it provided residents with the opportunity to sound off on their visions for Aurora's Downtown Core before Council convened a workshop on December 5 in the hopes of reaching a consensus on what to do with the area.

“I think the meeting will show that residents have been saying the same thing over and over and we're all looking for the same thing in the downtown: creating a vibrant downtown and it is time for Council to take action and make decisions,” said Councillor Mrakas at the start of the meeting. “We want to have that last input to be able to correlate between the years from all the different studies and all the different task forces to show that common themes run throughout the years.”

Added Councillor Thompson: “I think there is going to be a common theme about creating some sort of unique identity for Downtown. I think we will hear about restaurants and cafes and bistros, a little bit of an entertainment area and some of those will be the same common themes we have heard many years before, but part of the thought process was the old Kevin Costner movie, *Field of Dreams*, that if you build it they will come. We want to make sure they will come if we build it.”

Splitting up into break-out groups led by Councillors, members of the public considered what it would take to revitalize the area. In a group led by Councillors Kim and Pirri, the demolition of Library Square was among the very first issues brought up, along with parking, a water feature, and doing a land transfer deal with the owners of the Bacon Basketware site on Wellington Street West to transform the former Fleury Foundry into a destination not unlike Toronto's Distillery District.

In another group led by Councillor Abel, the “walkability” of the core was highlighted, along with providing more reasons for people to stay and “hang out” in the core.

They touched upon a theme explored more in-depth by Councillors Gaertner and Humfryes' group, including “connectivity” and providing a space that would draw youth.

Additional suggestions included focusing on drawing in a grocery store as, it was offered, going to get groceries is one of the primary reasons people living in the core shop elsewhere, a variety of restaurants and cafés, and shared spaces.

“We need places to live, places to drink, and spaces to eat and spaces to play,” said Councillor Abel, summing up his group's thoughts.

Added Councillor Gaertner: “The Town has to put money into it and show the business community and the development community that we're serious about this.”

Following the public conference, Councillor Thompson said their findings “validate what we have been hearing time after time after time.”