

Ex-councillor suggests redeveloping downtown core, creating town plaza

By Mike Baker

An innovative idea to revitalize parts of downtown Orangeville was unofficially endorsed by some members of Town Council on Monday (June 22).

A three-stage proposal to transform Alexandra Park and parts of Second St. and First Ave. into a 'town plaza' was introduced by former Orangeville councillor Sylvia Bradley this week. She would like to see the space behind Town Hall better utilized so as to encourage more people to visit Orangeville's 'beautiful' downtown core.

The idea was borne from a recommendation by Roger Brooks, an international tourism and community expert, upon his visit to Orangeville in 2018. Back then, Mr. Brooks made several suggestions to representatives from the Orangeville Business Improvement Area on how they could increase traffic in the downtown area.

'His idea was to develop a town plaza, or town square, to provide a meeting place of sorts for local residents,' Ms. Bradley told Council. 'This would truly be a gathering place for the people of Orangeville, a destination for them to go and do something downtown.'

Breaking down the proposal, Ms. Bradley said a first phase could see the Cenotaph and all other memorial items currently located in Alexandra Park relocated to Town-owned property at 27 and 29 First Ave, essentially creating a new memorial park.

'This would be a brand new, dedicated memorial park that would be a place of serenity, a place of rest and a very peaceful place for veterans and all residents of Orangeville,' Ms. Bradley said. 'It would include a whole new memorial, complete with walking trails, a pavilion to provide shelter, benches, flower gardens and the cenotaph and other memorial items.'

By moving the cenotaph, this would open up space to develop a town plaza in Alexandra Park. Stage two, as proposed by Ms. Bradley, would include the construction of an amphitheatre, walking trail, naturalized playground, game and hobby area, water feature and seating area in the downtown park. A third stage would later see a section of Second St., between Broadway and First Ave., permanently closed to make way for a full-time pedestrian mall.

All in, Ms. Bradley estimates the project could take anywhere from five to seven years to complete. The idea has already been endorsed by the local BIA.

Following the presentation, Mayor Sandy Brown admitted he would be in favour of improving Alexandra Park and making it more usable for local residents, while Coun. Debbie Sherwood said the development of a town plaza would be a 'social, cultural and economic benefit' to the community.

With Ms. Bradley including sketches of what the finished product could be, Coun. Joe Andrews admitted to being 'very impressed' by the proposal.

'I really like the idea. Putting my economic development hat on, this could be a huge benefit to the town at some point. I do like the idea of bringing an amphitheatre downtown. I've lived in communities where amphitheatres were created, and they really do bring the performing arts to the downtown core,' Coun. Andrews said. 'I'm also very impressed with the idea for the (pedestrian mall), and giving the farmer's market a permanent home.'

One stumbling block, raised by Coun. Lisa Post, is the fact that the Orangeville Legion is opposed to any plan that would move the Cenotaph, and other war-related memorials, from their current location at Alexandra Park.

?There is so much about this plan that makes a lot of sense, and it would be a fantastic addition to the community. However, after having had some preliminary talks with members of the Legion, they have told me they are absolutely not in support of moving the Cenotaph,? Coun. Post said. ?Some of their concerns relate to accessibility and space. They are worried that there won't be enough space to hold a Remembrance Day ceremony, the way we are currently doing it, in a new location.?

Coun. Todd Taylor brought up the elephant in the room that had not yet been addressed ? the potential costs that would be associated with such a drastic redevelopment.

?I do think it's a splendid idea. This would be a legacy project, not only for this Council, but for the town to enjoy for some time. The only piece that holds me, and likely all of us back, is how we would actually do this. What would be the financial sacrifice we have to make,? Coun. Taylor wondered. ?If there is a way we can do this, I would declare my support. I'm just wondering what the bill would look like.?

Since the proposal is still in its infancy, no projections were made regarding costs, although it will almost certainly cost the Town millions of dollars. Ms. Bradley indicated a significant portion could be funded by the federal and provincial governments by way of municipal infrastructure grants.

Ray Osmond, the Town's General Manager of Community Services, indicated plans to develop a downtown town plaza will be addressed in various reports that will soon be brought to Council, most notably the parks and recreation master plan, and tourism master plan. He would also inform Council that all community stakeholders, including the Orangeville Legion, would have an opportunity to provide feedback on any proposal before it's brought back to Council.

While it's been made clear the Legion doesn't necessarily buy into plans to move the Cenotaph, Coun. Post believes it would be a good move to relocate the statue to a new space.

?I think there's a lot of value to moving the Cenotaph to a spot where it won't be sat on during music events and things like that. Right now, I find some of those monuments (located at Alexandra Park) are disrespected when some community (events) come together,? Coun. Post said. ?It would be nice to have it off in its own spot. I whope we can make it work with the Legion.?