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Town of Aurora
Committee of the Whole Report
No. CMS25-001

Subject: Aurora Town Square – Grand Opening and 2025 Programming Overview

Prepared by: Phil Rose, Manager, Cultural Services

Department: Community Services

Date: February 11, 2025

Recommendation

1. That Report No. CMS25-001 be received for information.

Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of Aurora Town Square Grand Opening activities, and an overview of Town Square 2025 performances, special events, and programs.

- During the three-week Grand Opening, the Town hosted 13 performances, 4 special events, and 10 programs.
- The response to the Grand Opening was consistently positive from the public, local businesses and community partners.
- The Town will continue to host various performances, specials events, and programs at Town Square in 2025 that align with the Business Plan.

Background

The Aurora Town Square Grand Opening (ATSGO) took place from September 21 to October 13, 2024, and showcased a variety of performances, special events, and programs from a dynamic range of talent geared to various interests, ages, and demographics. ATSGO demonstrated the municipality's commitment to downtown revitalization and the expansion of cultural tourism opportunities by bringing together meaningful and high-quality programming that inspired community members and visitors alike.

Staff will continue to implement the Town Square Business Plan in 2025 by offering more performances, events and programs, in collaboration with the Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Public Library, the Town's Cultural Partners, and the wider community.

Analysis

During the three-week Grand Opening, the Town hosted 13 performances, 4 special events, and 10 programs.

With participation from over 115 artists and an attendance of approximately 7,495, ATSGO brought a sense of vitality to Aurora's downtown. The following table summarizes the performances, events and programs the Town offered during ATSGO:

Performances	Special Events	Programs
Norman Dance (x2)	Multicultural Festival and Community Ribbon Cutting	Museum tours
Marshall Dane	Culture Days	Silence Dance Party
Toronto Welsh Male Voice Choir	National Day for Truth and Reconciliation	PA Day Open House
York Chamber Ensemble	Fall Faves Festival	Alan Cross Music Salon
Aurora Community Band		Happy Woodlands Pet Cemetery film screening
George St. Kitts		WaaPaake film screening
Ysi Cattle and Louisa Barbosa		Aurora Film Circuit film screening
Exodus: Bob Marley Tribute		Future Grounds augmented reality artwork
Sloan		"Before the Land Was Broken" Indigenous mural unveiling
Rubber Tire Peep Show		Aurora Room exhibition opening
Fiddlestix		

The Beresfords		
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In addition to the Town's programming, the Aurora Cultural Centre (ACC) and Aurora Public Library (APL) offered various programs throughout ATSGO. APL saw a 32 per cent increase in traffic overall, with an additional 25,509 people coming into the Library compared to the same period in 2023.

The ACC delivered three professional programs during the grand opening: visual arts, performing arts, and arts education. These programs engaged the community through various exhibitions, performances, and educational initiatives. The gallery programming featured several exhibits, including *Camp Retrospective* (a student-art exhibit), *Expressions of Critical Thought*, and *The Living Corridor* (a temporary mural and exhibit offering engagement opportunities with artists). Additionally, the ACC collaborated with the Town's *Future Grounds*, an augmented reality exhibit showcasing works by eight emerging artists, displayed throughout interior and exterior spaces. This initiative included an artist panel featuring these artists and Oddside Arts, a mentoring organization that supported the augmented reality professional development aspect. The performing arts program presented two live events at the Davide De Simone Performance Hall: a jazz performance by Barbra Lica and Charlotte McAfee-Brunner on September 27th, and a comedy show featuring host Martha Chaves, Fiona O'Brien, Danish Anwar, and Ali Hassan on October 5th. The arts education program included 11 "Discovery Days" demo and sneak-peek education open houses from September 21-28 and 33 educational sessions in the Shining Hill Visual Arts rooms. Additional community events included a VIP Season Launch on September 25th, celebrating ACC's return to Aurora Town Square, and a Concert for Truth & Reconciliation on September 30th, featuring Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, an Elder from the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, alongside a curated artist program by Anishinaabe/Cayuga artist Elaine Bomberry from Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation. In the months leading up and over the season, the ACC onboarded 77 new community volunteers to support Aurora Town Square operations, a program that continues to grow and foster valuable social connections. Through these initiatives, ACC demonstrated its commitment to enhancing community engagement and reinforcing its role as a cornerstone of Aurora's cultural identity.

The Town worked with various other partners to make ATSGO possible, including the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, Aurora Downtown Business Association, Marquee Theatrical Productions, Pinetree Potters Guild, Shadowpath Theatre, Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, Aurora Historical Society, Aurora Farmers' Market & Artisan Fair, Aurora Film Circuit, and others.

A total of 46 local businesses participated as Grand Opening Business Partners, demonstrating a strong interest in community involvement and the promotional opportunities that ATSGO provided the local economy.

The Armoury Café also successfully launched during ATSGO. It was well received by the community, maintaining a steady flow of customers throughout this period.

The public's response to the Grand Opening was consistently positive.

To gather feedback from Grand Opening attendees, the Town promoted an online survey across multiple channels, including onsite during the event, on social media, and through email campaigns. We received 180 survey responses, offering valuable insights into visitors' experiences.

A notable 42.9 per cent of respondents felt their experience met expectations. When asked, "How soon do you think you will return to Aurora Town Square?", 100 per cent of respondents indicated they would return, signaling strong interest and positive impressions of the new facility: 38.9 per cent planned to return within 1-2 weeks, 33.3 per cent intended to return within the next month, and 27.8 per cent are likely to return within the year.

Below is a small selection of many comments that express the positive sentiment shared by our attendees:

- "The acoustics in the performance space are excellent - I had the chance to sit in various rows and it was perfect."
- "It's beautiful. Very proud to have a venue of this caliber in Aurora. So nice to have somewhere for residents of Aurora to gather."
- "We live in Aurora and have been eagerly awaiting the project's completion. It exceeded our expectations. We've also had a chance to visit the Aurora Armoury Cafe and we'll definitely be back to enjoy coffee and treats."
- "Town Square is beautiful. We look forward to attending many events and enjoying a cup of coffee on the bridge or outside in the courtyard. Can't wait to see what other events will be coming in the future. Well done to all staff and volunteers who made the grand opening such a success."
- "Enjoyed all of the shows we have seen so far. The convenience of the theatre being so close to home is such a bonus. The staff have been amazing and the atmosphere is so inviting:)"
- "Fabulous facility and great line up of events. So many other activities also associated. Way to go! Keep expanding the programming!"

- “Aurora, today is a day we’ve all been waiting for. The doors to Aurora Town Square are finally open, and with it begins three weeks of celebration. I think back to those high school days, spending quiet hours in the Aurora Public Library, lost in books. Now, I bring my kids here, and it’s something special – a full-circle moment in a place that’s grown with us. Aurora Town Square isn’t just brick and mortar; it’s the heart of our town. It stands for our belief in culture, community, and the future.”
- “Exciting times with the grand opening of the highly anticipated Aurora Town Square! It’s a beautiful upgrade to the downtown area, and the venue looks incredible – job well done so far.”

The survey also revealed that 66.7 per cent of respondents noted they drove or carpoled to Aurora Town Square and of those who drove, 72 percent noted their walk time to Town Square from their parking spot was under nine minutes. The combination of Town Square surface parking, parking improvements to Church Street and Victoria Street, as well as street parking on the surrounding streets ensured there was adequate parking supply to accommodate visitors throughout ATSGO, even during high peak periods

Webpage Views:

From the time tickets went on sale until the end of the Grand Opening period, the Town Square website received 51,021 views, with 23,276 occurring in September alone. Our "What's On" page was the most highly visited section, reflecting strong interest in event details, tickets, and programming.

In terms of traffic acquisition, 28.6 per cent of our user traffic originated from organic search, 28.3 per cent from direct visits, and 23.3 per cent from organic social media sources. These represented the highest percentages of traffic acquisition, with additional visitors reaching the site through other channels as well. This distribution shows a balanced mix of discovery channels, with organic search and direct traffic driving the largest share, complemented by social media engagement that helped amplify awareness of the Grand Opening.

Social Media Sentiment:

In the Grand Opening survey, 33.9 per cent of respondents indicated they learned about the multi-week opening through social media, making it the most effective channel for promotion. Social media platforms received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the community about Town Square and Grand Opening experiences.

Town Square's social media channels, which launched in the spring of 2023, are still relatively new. However, our follower growth has already reached levels comparable to established venues. For example, on Instagram, Town Square ended Grand Opening with 1,841 followers, while similar venues such as Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts has 2,143, Flato Markham Theatre has 3,252, Oakville Centre for Performing Arts has 2,110, and Sanderson Centre has 2,450. This indicates that Town Square is on track with organizations that have had a longer presence in the market.

On Facebook, we ended the Grand Opening campaign with 2,104 followers. In comparison, Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts has 3,071 followers, and Flato Markham Theatre has 4,546. These venues have more mature and developed audiences, and Town Square's impressive growth demonstrates our strong momentum towards reaching their level of engagement.

The Town's social media and website metrics far exceeded expectations, demonstrating that our targeted marketing efforts were effective. Key performance indicators, such as impressions, engagements, and clicks, surpassed set goals, reflecting strong public interest and digital reach. This success was further validated by qualitative feedback, which consistently highlighted the appeal and clarity of our promotional efforts.

eNewsletter Following and Engagement:

At the start of 2024, the Town Square monthly newsletter had 1,356 subscribers. By June, this number had grown to 1,515, reflecting an 11.7 per cent increase. During the Grand Opening period—beginning with the announcement of event dates, followed by ticket sales, and culminating in the active opening—our subscriber list surged to 1,983, representing a 46.3 per cent growth over the year. Additionally, during the opening months, the list grew by 30.8 per cent, reflecting heightened interest in learning more about Town Square.

In 2024, the newsletter's average open rate was 62.94 per cent. According to Constant Contact (our vendor used to distribute eNewsletters), the average email open rate in 2024 typically ranged between 15 to 25 per cent for most industries, indicating that Town Square's newsletter is significantly outperforming industry averages in terms of open rate, demonstrating strong audience engagement and interest.

Advertising

The marketing campaign for Town Square's Grand Opening, launched in early summer 2024, used a dynamic mix of traditional and digital strategies to engage audiences from

Aurora, York Region, and beyond. Traditional efforts included print ads in local and regional publications like Neighbour, Canada Lifestyle Magazine, and The Globe & Mail, along with direct mailers reaching over 17,000 homes. Radio partnerships with 105.9 The Region and 107.5 Kool FM featured ad spots and giveaways, while local events such as Ribfest, Movies in the Park, and Colours of Fall amplified visibility through postcards and on-site booths.

Innovative digital tactics included Weather Network takeovers, Cineplex Aurora trailers, YRT bus ads, and geofencing campaigns, alongside robust social media efforts. Weather Network ads outperformed benchmarks, while Rogers partnerships generated 53,000 impressions and an 85.96 per cent video completion rate. High-impact placements, such as Gardiner Expressway ads, further boosted awareness. Email campaigns and social media reached tens of thousands, with audiences engaging heavily through clicks, shares, and video views. By blending traditional methods with digital strategies, the campaign achieved broad reach, raising significant awareness and excitement for Town Square's Grand Opening.

Business Community Response:

Although post-ATSGO surveying yielded a limited response from participating businesses, the feedback received was positive and revealed a unanimous interest in future partnerships with the Town.

One business expressed that the event boosted their brand visibility, stating, "I do, however, feel that the brand awareness that this advertisement has provided me with has been great! I'm all about growing my brand and my business. I would very much like to be considered for the Town's future opportunities."

This positive sentiment highlights ATSGO's success in supporting local businesses and establishing potential for future collaborative efforts.

The Town will continue to host various performances, specials events, and programs at Town Square in 2025 that align with the Town Square Business Plan.

Town Square will continue to feature a well-rounded calendar of performances, events and programs offered by the Town, ACC, APL, the Town's Cultural Partners, and the wider community. These offerings will include art exhibitions, live performances, workshops, lectures, film screenings, cultural festivals that cater to a wide range of interests, and more. Beginning in 2025, the Town will also begin to provide culture and heritage-related education programs for local and regional school groups.

Some of the Town's special events to be hosted at Town Square will include the Mayor's Levee, Black History Month, Arctic Adventure, Aurora Performing Arts Festival, National Indigenous History Month, National Indigenous Peoples Day, Emancipation Day, Doors Open, Culture Days, National Day for Truth & Reconciliation, Aurora's Christmas Market and the Menorah Lighting Ceremony.

With 2025 being the first full year of Town Square operations, the Town will update the 2023 Business Plan before the end of the year to ensure the adaptive operating structure chosen to govern Town Square continues to meet the needs of the Town, its partners and the community.

Advisory Committee Review

Not applicable.

Legal Considerations

None.

Financial Implications

The Aurora Town Square Grand Opening was delivered within its allocated budget.

Communications Considerations

In 2025, communications will build on the momentum of Town Square's Grand Opening to position it as a vibrant downtown destination blending modern amenities with small-town charm. Through a strategic mix of traditional and digital marketing, we will promote programs, performances, events, exhibitions, and rentals, ensuring widespread visibility and engagement. Key efforts will include leveraging insights from the Grand Opening to create targeted social media content, optimizing the Town Square microsite for user experience and ticket sales, and delivering timely updates through the monthly e-newsletter and targeted email campaigns.

Media relations and a range of print and digital materials, including promotional videos and ads, will further amplify awareness and community connection. By focusing on growth, engagement, and visibility, communications will ensure Town Square's continued success as a dynamic cultural hub in its first full year of programming.

Climate Change Considerations

The recommendations from this report do not immediately impact greenhouse gas emissions or impact climate change adaptation.

Link to Strategic Plan

Aurora Town Square supports the Town's Strategic Plan, including the following goals and key objectives:

Supporting an exceptional quality of life for all in its accomplishment in satisfying requirements in the following key objectives within these goal statements:

- Celebrating and promoting our culture
- Strengthening the fabric of our community
- Encouraging an active and healthy lifestyle

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

1. Council may provide further direction.

Conclusions

The Town Square Grand Opening was a significant milestone for Aurora. Spanning 23 consecutive days and nights, this once-in-a-generation celebration offered a diverse array of programming that established Town Square as a cultural destination within York Region. It supported the local economy and neighbourhood businesses, while also creating lasting memories for the many Grand Opening attendees.

As co-located organizations, the Town, ACC, APL will continue to work collaboratively in 2025 to ensure the public receives a range of complementary programs geared to various skill levels and life experiences. Town Square will also present opportunities for the Town to work with local organizations and businesses to provide exciting and enriching experiences that nurture economic development and cultural tourism.

Staff will revise the Town Square Business Plan before the end of the year to reflect any changes to the governance structure based on lessons learned from the first official year of operations.

Attachments

None.

Previous Reports

None.

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on January 23, 2025

Approvals

Approved by Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer