



AURORA DOWNTOWN QUARTERLY MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

MAY 1, 2009

GENTLEMEN (AND LADIES) – START THOSE TASTEBUDS!

Three good things about springtime:

- The trees and flowers are blooming!
- Kosuke Fukudome drove in five runs on his birthday (April 26th) so the Cubs could certainly be headed for the World Series this year!
- Tickets are available for the 7th Annual Downtown Aurora Taste!

Hosted by the Exchange Club of Aurora, the Downtown Aurora Taste is a great opportunity to sample the offerings of 13 terrific restaurants: Bacci Pizzeria, Ballydoyle, Cazadores, the Dirty Duck, Jimmy John's Gourmet Sandwiches, Julio's Grill, La France Bakery, La Quinta de los Reyes, New China Hut #3, Pesto Ristorante, the River's Edge Café, Tecalitlan Restaurant, and Walter Payton's Roundhouse, while supporting programs to provide youth scholarships and prevent child abuse.

The event is scheduled for Tuesday, May 12, 2009 from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m. Ticket books cost \$25 and can be purchased from the Exchange Club (call 630-415-1263), at the Mayor's Office of Special Events at 5 E. Downer Place, or online at www.auroraexchange.org (\$5 PayPal service charge per order). Attendees are eligible to win a variety of raffle prizes, and parking is free.

Spread the word...and, if you're a downtown business owner, spruce up your display windows and stay open late on May 12th so new customers can stop in while they're strolling the neighborhood, making their way from one yummy food experience to the next.

DOWNTOWN PARKING – THE SAGA CONTINUES

In our last quarterly update (February, 2009) we asked you to complete a membership survey, letting us know your thoughts about downtown activities and ideas for improvement. Many respondents praised the holiday decorations (especially Santa

Claus peeking his nose over the wall at the main branch of the Aurora Public Library on Benton Street) landscaping improvements, and the Downtown Alive festival series. One ongoing problem, of course, is parking, which seems always to engender much controversy and many proposed solutions. The Aurora Downtown Parking Committee continues to meet under the leadership of co-chairs Dan Hites and Shirley Flaherty, and regularly considers strategies to make parking downtown less of a hassle.

While the City works on the “big parking picture,” you can help ameliorate day-to-day parking issues and negative perceptions about downtown parking:

- Call Charlie Koch in the City’s Revenue and Collections Division (630-844-3625) to purchase off-street permits for yourself and your employees, thereby ensuring that on-street parking spaces are available for paying customers;
- Call Angelly Pietropaolo in the City’s Neighborhood Standards Department (630-897-4589) to report drivers who feed meters and any other parking violations that you observe. Your call will remain anonymous.
- Brighten up your display windows and storefronts. Then, as visitors walk from a parking space to their destination, they will not feel as if they’re traveling across a vast wasteland to do so. Instead, their walk will be a pleasant journey with interesting, engaging views along the way. If you own a building with vacant, street-level space, wash the windows, and add some lights and a display (artwork would be great!).

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

You’ve probably noticed many contractors’ vehicles and heavy equipment working around the FoxWalk district in the past few weeks. Under the skilled project management of the City’s Public Works Department, beautiful new sidewalks have been poured, and a tree-lined gateway has been constructed to enhance the northwest entry to downtown, at Lake and New York streets. Signal improvements and upgrades are planned as well.

Downtown Services crews are re-setting pavers in existing sidewalks and planting new trees to replace dead ones that had been previously removed. A tree replacement schedule is being developed for the future.

Staff from the Street Division has completed the installation of wayfinding and destination signage, and placed new, decorative banners on downtown lightpoles.

ComEd is in the midst of a major electrical upgrade (\$1,000,000) to the Broadway/East side corridor from New York to Benton Street, which should be completed by mid-June.

WILL YOUR BUSINESS SURVIVE IN TOUGH TIMES?

A group of highly-motivated downtown restaurant owners and retailers participated in two roundtable sessions, March 16th and April 20th on the 3rd floor gallery of the Aurora Art and History Center to share information about ways to make the best of bad times.

Presenters included Harriet Parker, Manager of the Small Business Development Center at Waubensee Community College; Kathy Swigart, graphic designer, merchandising expert, and manager of the gift shop for the David L. Pierce Art and History Center; Jennifer Grobe, Preservation/Downtown Planning Specialist for the City of Aurora; and me (Karen Christensen, Downtown Development Director).

We discussed how to create innovative window displays (“design on a dime”), store layouts, web-based marketing, cooperative advertising and promotions, customer service, technical assistance programs offered by Waubensee Community College, and financial help from the City of Aurora. Those who attended were asked to undertake peer reviews of each other’s businesses and of their own establishments.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the materials that were distributed, including the “peer review” homework assignment so you can execute one for your own business, call me at 630-844-3670 or send me an email (kchristensen@aurora-il.org).

FACING CHALLENGES BLOCK BY BLOCK

Business and property owners on La Salle Street (Benton to Downer) have been meeting regularly with staff from the Aurora Economic Development Commission and the Downtown Development Division, plus representatives from the Aurora Downtown Board of Directors, to craft ideas that might enhance their block’s economic viability. The group has shared redevelopment concepts and hosted a presentation by Officer Tom McNamara on safety and crime prevention.

If you and your neighbors are interested in organizing a block group like the one described above, please call so we can discuss how the City and Aurora Downtown might assist you.

AVAILABLE PROPERTIES LIST

Downtown Development Division staff has recently updated the available properties list that is posted on the Aurora Downtown website (www.auroradowntown.org). If you’ve got space to lease or sell, check the website to verify your listing. Please call or email me with any corrections or additions.

DOWNTOWN AURORAN MAGAZINE COMING SOON!

Local freelance writer Marissa Amoni has taken to wearing a new hat: that of editor and publisher of a new magazine, set to be launched in early summer, 2009. Kim Granholm, of Aurora Fastprint, is working with Amoni as print consultant and designer.

The publication is planned as a locally-produced, independent, all-volunteer operation, focused on downtown Aurora and its success. It will be published quarterly, with 1000 copies distributed free of charge throughout downtown and select locations in the city.

Ms. Amoni's vision is to create a magazine that highlights arts and culture, with poetry, lyrics, artwork, photography, news, event listings, business and artist profiles, feature stories, restaurant reviews, recipes (vegetarian, organic, local, ethnic) and history. Advertising and sponsorship opportunities are available. For more information, or to submit content, contact the publisher at downtownauroran@gmail.com.

BUILDING IMPROVEMENT UPDATES

Below is a list of all the Certificates of Appropriateness approved for projects from February, 2009 through April, 2009:

- 122 W. Downer Place, Roman Gabriel Alonzo, install new fascia sign
- 217-219 E. Galena Boulevard, James Figuerora, install new skylights
- 28 W. New York Street, Ballydoyle, revise window design
- 13 N. Broadway, Sonrisas, install new awning and wall sign (rear entry)
- 2 W. Downer Place, Computeks, install new wall sign
- 36-52 E. New York and 50-52 N. Broadway, La Quinta de los Reyes, install new signs and window lettering
- 5 E. Galena Boulevard, Waubensee Community College bookstore, install new entry doors
- 84 S. Broadway, Xpert Insurance, install new plate glass
- 220 E. Galena, Elizabeth Chapa, install new fascia signage
- 218 E. Benton, Trinity Episcopal Church, tuckpoint chimney
- 43 E. Galena, City of Aurora, undertake masonry repairs
- 35 S. Stolp, Tools for Life, install new fascia signage
- 20 E. Downer, City of Aurora, undertake masonry repairs
- 29 W. New York, The Martini Room, install new wall sign and paint exterior masonry and doors
- 18 S. River, Waubensee Community College, install construction signs
- 18 W. Benton, SciTech, install new ground signs and banners

Other downtown development news of note:

- The owners of Sophisticated You (David and Debra Johnson) at 57 S. Broadway are embarking on Phase I of a façade improvement project for their building
- Plainfield 135th LLC will be redeveloping vacant land on Lincoln/New York/Spring Street as a commuter parking lot
- Final Design Review Committee/Riverwalk Commission approvals have been issued for the lower level Riverwalk (FoxWalk) adjacent to the new Waubensee Community College campus
- Wayside Cross Ministries, 211-215 and 223 E. New York Street, will be demolishing two existing buildings and constructing a new facility with open space

AURORA ARTWALK – THEY CAME, THEY SAW, THEY HAD A GREAT TIME!

Chalk up another successful ArtWalk – thanks to the hard work of volunteers and the Cultural Creatives, an ad hoc group of local artists, business people, property owners, and patrons with a common interest in encouraging an arts-friendly environment. According to their vision statement, they believe “...a strong arts presence will make downtown Aurora a place where people want to live, work and play.”

Aurora Downtown has helped “seed” the Cultural Creatives with funding for two ArtWalks to date: September 12, 2008, and March 27, 2009. It is estimated that over one thousand visitors came down for the most recent walk and enjoyed a wide range of attractions that included prize-winners Pamela J. Hart (visual artist) and the Myaxphyrgian Jazztet (performers). There were belly-dancers, fiber artists, writers, a hammered dulcimer player, jewelers, photographers, vocalists, sculptors – way too much to describe in words. For photos and details, visit www.auroraartwalk.com. Mark your calendar now for Friday, October 9, 2009 – the next event – and shame on you if you let this pass you by again!

LIVING DOWNTOWN TOUR: OUR VERY OWN HOME IMPROVEMENT SHOW

It’s time to get off the couch, switch off the “reality” t.v. – and see what’s happening for real right in your own backyard. On Sunday, June 14th, we’ll be hosting a Living Downtown Tour from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. Visitors will have the chance to see the interiors of residential units – rehabs and new construction – in 11 buildings, just as they would on a traditional housewalk.

Advance tickets are \$10 (plus a \$2 service fee) and can be purchased online at www.auroradowntown.org. Tickets will be also available on the day of the event for \$15 – so take advantage of the “early bird” discount and buy those tickets now! You’ll enjoy all kinds of surprises, including delectable refreshments at two hospitality suites: 74 S. LaSalle Street (the Theiss Building) and River Street Plaza at 100 S. Benton.

DOWNTOWN ALIVE: ARE YOU READY TO ROCK AND ROLL?

We know you've already loaded the lawn chairs into the back of the pick-up for the kickoff of Downtown Alive, Friday, June 19th - where Los Lobos will star as the Blues on the Fox headliner. The summer festival season has been compressed to four weekends (Friday and Saturday nights) and expanded to include bigger "name" performers and regional attractions. You'll find details and the full schedule at www.downtownaliveaurora.com, an enhanced and improved website for this bundle of fun.

SPOTLIGHT ON A NEIGHBOR

Spotlight on: Anand Sangtani, Ekus Realty

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Nearly two years ago, I met a real estate agent named Larry Ballard who had three clients that were interested in purchasing property in downtown Aurora. They sought a redevelopment project that might include the relocation of their software engineering business.

I talk to many people who fit a similar model. We get together in my office, we have a pleasant conversation, I send them additional information, we speak a few more times, and then they make a decision to purchase, or not. When I met this group, however, I was struck immediately by the high quality of their questions – and the fact that, although I believed they were seriously looking for an investment, they were quite obviously not individuals who made quick or impetuous decisions.

Fast-forward to the present, and allow me to introduce you to Anand Sangtani, one of the principals in the group described above, Ekus Realty. The three partners did their homework and deliberated carefully - and are now the owners of 14-20 N. Broadway. They have retained Batir Architecture, Ltd. of St. Charles to assist with the implementation of a very interesting redevelopment project.

Mr. Sangtani graciously agreed to be interviewed, and explained that the Ekus Realty partnership included two other members: Ravinder Pal, who had been Mr. Sangtani's co-worker at a technology firm, and Harpal Singh, a friend of Mr. Pal's. Mr. Singh and Mr. Pal hail from New Delhi, the capital city of India. Mr. Pal lives in Lisle; Mr. Singh lives in Aurora, and Mr. Sangtani lives in Barrington. Mr. Sangtani said that he is looking forward to bringing his family to Aurora for the summer festivals; his daughter Mahima will soon be eight years old, and son Monish will soon be six.

Mr. Singh had prior experience owning rental residential properties. He was the catalyst who "stumbled upon downtown Aurora" and invited Mr. Pal to consider a joint venture. Mr. Pal and Mr. Sangtani had previously formed a software engineering consulting practice together, and so Mr. Sangtani was invited to become a partner in Ekus Realty.

“Mr. Pal and I were looking to diversity our interests; we wanted to add real estate to our technology practice. We were interested in commercial property rather than residential since we did not feel we had sufficient time to attend to the needs of residential tenants, and thought we might use some of the commercial space for our own business.”

Mr. Sangtani explained further that he and Mr. Pal are consulting software programmers: technology architects who design web-based systems. “We are basically a soup to nuts enterprise; we do everything that is required, starting from the client’s vision,” he said. Teams of programmers work to gather the requirements for the application, and continue through testing and release of the program.

“We set the architecture guidelines, very similar to a construction project, except that we are building a software program instead of a building. We lay the foundation, identify programmers, create code reviews, set up checkpoints to make sure we are building the application correctly, test before it goes live. We set milestones with the client to validate that we are making progress. We change scope as necessary, adding features – building to suit, you might say. We follow the industry standard guidelines. In the end if the product works without any errors, then we have accomplished our goal.”

Mr. Sangtani’s firm builds e-commerce websites which require tight coordination with multiple systems: backend operations, payments, inventory control, order fulfillment. “We have non-disclosure agreements with our clients, so I can’t reveal details of what we do, but our clients can provide references without disclosing sensitive intellectual property issues. Every application is unique, every system is custom designed.”

There are obvious parallels between building technological applications and the construction of buildings: lots of checks and balances. Mr. Sangtani commented that of 100 applications that are built, only 10% actually go live because of weak planning upfront. “Most large systems fail because of poor planning,” he said. “We are excited about building in downtown Aurora, about the chance to do something that is not technology-related. We will take our time to formulate a sound plan.” The partners hope to develop a mixed-use project, but no final determination of uses has yet been made. We look forward to seeing their redevelopment project take shape.

Please do not hesitate to call if you’ve got redevelopment ideas of your own...and enjoy the beautiful spring and summer season in downtown Aurora!

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