

Historic business core should be designated: Council

By Brock Weir

Aurora's historic Yonge Street core should have heritage protection, according to the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee. This week, Council will discuss a recommendation from the Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) to ensure 15 buildings in Aurora's historic business centre be designated under the Ontario Heritage Act.

Council members debated the recommendation at the Committee level last week, but how such a designation moves forward ? if at all ? will likely be determined this week.

Tackling HAC's recommendation for the first time, the principle of designating the commercial blocks on either side of Yonge Street from Wellington in the north to Mosley Street in the south received broad support from Council members.

The bone of contention, however, was whether this designation should be brought down in consultation with the property owners. During March and April of this year, a heritage evaluation working group worked with municipal staff to research the historic, architectural and contextual merits of the buildings in this corridor, which is generally referred to as Aurora's Main Street. The review concludes that 14 of the 15 properties considered were significant from a historical, architectural and contextual standpoint, with the 15th, the recently vacated CIBC building scoring just slightly less in their evaluation, making the grade only for its architectural and contextual merits.

Should these buildings ultimately receive designation, property owners will not be able to alter any part of the exterior. By the time HAC's recommendations came up for review last week, however, Mayor Geoff Dawe brought a note of caution into the debate.

?My concern with this is that we have not engaged the owners at this point,? he said. ?We're looking at substantial changes to the status of their buildings and I think it would be appropriate to engage the owners. My suggestion is what we did with the fields that we're looking at [with] the Hallmark lands, refer that back to the Heritage Advisory Committee with a request that they engage the owners so they can have a robust discussion with the owners at the Committee and then come back to us as well.?

Mayor Dawe's viewpoint was shared, to a point, by Councillor Wendy Gaertner but his motion to have that ?robust discussion? went a bit too far.

?I will be voting against it simply because I believe we should notify the owners by letter, but I don't think we need to do a full public engagement,? she said.

Councillor Jeff Thom, on the other hand, said there has been able public engagement on the subject throughout the last three decades and, if HAC's recommendations are ultimately ratified, consultations will continue in another channel. This would include a Notice to Designate issued by the Town, which would serve as a notice of intention, and property owners would have 30 days to appeal that decision. Should property owners choose to do so, this appeal would be heard by a Conservation Review Board.

?This whole process so far has been a totally open, public process,? said Councillor Thom, noting the review process outlined above. ?Furthermore to that, consultation will not change the facts. These buildings are historical, they are important to the Town's not only character of our main street, but I think the character of our town as a whole. No amount of consultation will change their importance.

?The buildings are historically important, the report is pretty clear: some of these buildings scored in the 90 per cent range, the 80 per cent range, massively important to the Town. In my mind, these buildings, regardless of whether the owners are for designation or are not in favour of Part Four designation, are worthy of designation, worthy of protecting.?

Councillor Tom Mrakas shared this sentiment, stating ?while it is important to engage and speak to the property owners,? there was enough time to reach out to them so they are aware the matter is up for Council's consideration this week.

?We can afford them the opportunity to come before us next week and we can hear them and hear [their] concerns. That is not going to change the evaluation of those properties,? said Councillor Mrakas, adding the area is already earmarked for intensification. We need to do it under our terms and protecting and preserving our history and heritage is important to this community and the residents. It will afford us the [opportunity] to use the tools afforded to us by the Province within the Heritage Act to make sure that when we move forward with development that we can work with the applicant and make sure that development occurs in preserving and protecting those heritage features of those properties and we can grow under our own terms.?

But joining calls for further input from the property owners were Councillors Sandra Humfries and John Abel.

?The reason I am in favour of the referral is because I think there are more pieces than just the HAC. I think there's the property owners, I think the Business Improvement association might be interested in the thoughts and the impacts of the designation as well

as the Chamber,? said Councillor Abel. ?I think all these parties should have a voice so I can better understand what the implications are of designating these properties. In my might, right off the bat, if you designate it, it means you can't develop on it and then you don't attract development dollars and people to do it. I would like to refer it back and understand that.?