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Further restrictions are not wanted, argue opposition to Heritage District



By Brock Weir

Nearly 200 people filled Aurora's Council Chambers on Wednesday night to speak out on the planned Heritage Conservation District in Southeast Old Aurora.

Although many people did not get up to the podium to voice their support or concerns, of the over 40 residents who did, those against it were the overwhelming majority.

Residents and property owners came up to the podium one by one to appeal to Council to nip the proposed Heritage Conservation District (HCD) in the bud, speaking out against what they felt would be undue restrictions imposed on them from Town Hall to maintain their properties as they see fit, the likelihood of their insurance going up as a result of the HCD, or being obliterated all together, and ultimately losing a degree of the resale value of their respective properties.

For many on both sides of the debate, there was a keen sense of appreciation for the heritage value in the neighbourhood but, for opponents, regulation was going one step too far.

?As property owners and residents, we respect and appreciate, perhaps more than most, the venerable character of our particular neighbourhood,? said resident Mary O'Reilly. ?Our neighbourhood evolved gradually, under our influence, to modern use and function with sensitivity. We have more than demonstrated our concern for the heritage of our neighbourhood. Now, we are confronted with a plan for heritage designation. We do not understand the need for this action.

?We have found little comfort or assurance that designation is an asset and not a disadvantage to property ownership. The idea penalties could be imposed for doing work that doesn't conform to an interpretation of what we can and cannot do with our property is completely unacceptable to us. We are requesting the process end here and now. As time passes, we continue to uncover more reasons to oppose and none to recommend it. If the process continues, we will not change our position. We will simply become more firm in our resolve.?

A shortage of reasons to oppose the HCD was certainly not an issue for the majority of those in attendance last week. The most predominant of these was the issue of insurance as residents on both sides squared off on whether insurance brokers would take on a property in an HCD. Several neighbours said they made enquiries but more often than not came up empty.

?We have contacted three insurance companies and all of these insurance companies have severe restrictions on homeowners and these could actually cause the homeowner to lose their insurance and lose their home,? said resident Brian Murphy, noting companies are still grappling with claims stemming from the recent ice storm. ?This is not a good time, as insurance companies are in a foul mood.?

Added John Friedbacher: ?If you have any emails or documents from any source, including insurance companies, stating there is no problem with insuring a heritage home with guaranteed replacement costs, get it in writing. All of this can be avoided now by simply saying no.?

Several residents voiced their support for Heritage Designation, but only if this heritage designation applied to individual homes. If the intent was to go forward with an HCD on the entire community, one of the ?creative solutions? offered last week was following the lead of some municipalities like Cambridge which allows for property owners to opt out of the blanket designation. Overall, however, many said they were concerned with overregulation.

?I believe everyone has good intentions, but overregulation covered under the Heritage Act is a very big concern,? said Glenn Hefner.

Added Nancee Webb: ?Is [the purpose of this] to keep monster homes out, condos out, or to ensure homeowners maintain their property? We already have zoning bylaws which should do this. Please do not allow this heritage designation to take place. We do not want this.

?It is difficult to assess the impact of designation on a particular area within a particular community. What I don't understand is why the consultants would be citing studies done in other areas across Ontario when we have an eight year old HCD right here in Aurora.?

For former councillor Damir Vrancic, who has converted a home in the proposed HCD into a law practice, there has to be a balance struck between ?preserving our values and our liberties.?

?Most of us here who are now developers would probably think it is wrong to build monster homes in our established neighborhoods,? he said, arguing that large frontages and deep properties in the area make it attractive to monster home builders. This, in turn, would drive up property values but also force the tax base to rise, challenging some residents in the community to meet those costs. That issue would be addressed through proactive bylaws.

?You owe it to us to find creative ways of preserving for those people who are arguing to retain the status quo and those who have also invested funds into this community that you reserve our values and our liberties so you have some ability to deal with our properties without undue restriction,? he concluded.