

Bylaw could crack down on vacant property owners

By Brock Weir

As concerns mount over the number of vacant homes and businesses in Aurora, the Town is set to take a degree of action with a new bylaw getting strict on property owners.

Council approved developing a new bylaw this week which put in place a Vacant Buildings Registry.

Given the green light at last week, the enacted Vacant Buildings Registry would give building owners 90 days to register their vacant buildings with the Town, ensure current contact information on file is correct, provide secondary emergency contact information, proof of insurance, inspection reports when necessary, and allow inspections to ensure each building meets property standards bylaws.

Owners failing to maintain or register their buildings could face fines, and a fee would be charged for registering their buildings each year.

According to Mandie Crawford, Aurora's Manager of Bylaw Services, the Registry is intended to close a gap when it comes to maintaining property standards in Town.

“Vacant buildings left unoccupied for extended periods of time present concerns to business owners, residents and the Town of Aurora,” she said. “Businesses owners are concerned about vacant units having a negative impact on their businesses due to reduced property values and increased crime. Additionally, local residents want vacant homes in their areas to have houses and yards maintained for their enjoyment and to ensure property values are not affected.

“The Fire Department and Police in cities such as Hamilton and Brantford have expressed concerns about the safety of unoccupied buildings as they are often a target for arson and other criminal activity. Complaints about vacant homes and businesses also impact resources of by-law staff who when responding to concerns about the conditions must locate current owners and make arrangements to inspect, which at times is challenging. Inspections may lead to Orders to Comply and further follow-up inspections.”

Laws currently on the books are limited in scope, she added, noting that buildings left vacant for more than 90 days are currently only required to shut off non-essential services and ensure the buildings are kept secure.”

“There is no requirement for registering these buildings under the Property Standards By-law and staff are unaware that there may be a property standards issue until a complaint is received. Locating the owners in these instances can be difficult, often delaying remedial work or enforcement actions on unkempt or derelict buildings.”

Reviewing the proposed registry last week, Council members expressed their enthusiasm but questions were raised over charging building owners a fee to register their properties.

“If it is to the Town's best interest to keep a record of this and we want people to participate, why would we be charging a fee?” asked Councillor Michael Thompson. “Why wouldn't we just encourage them to do it and not charge that fee? We might have challenges with people not really wanting to participate in it and then we are enforcing this bylaw as well.”

From the perspective of Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Corporate Services, the fee is to offset the administrative costs of running the program. Applications will be required, documentation will need to be reviewed and validated, and inspections by bylaw officials might be required as well.

Others, such as Councillor John Abel, questioned whether there should be two standards ? one for residential and one for commercial building owners.

“There is a lot of concern about residential properties being bought and assumed to be foreign investment,” he said. “We're realising that they sit empty often. Some of them are leased and that is fine but some of them sit empty and there is concern about the impact that has on housing and property standards.”

There is more to look at in residential versus commercial, said Ms. van Leeuwen, and the details will need to be worked through, such as exemptions for residential family dwellings in the case of people travelling south for winter.