

Heritage Grant program should focus on facades, and expand in the future: committee

Aurora is looking into the establishment of a Heritage Grant program to help owners of historic properties maintain their build treasures ? but the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee has suggested any program should start small and grow into the future.

This fall, Council is expected to put flesh on the bones of a future Heritage Grant Program, an initiative put forward by Mayor Tom Mrakas and approved by Council this past spring to provide financial assistance to preserve and restore designated properties.

?Preserving and promoting our Town's heritage is of paramount importance to the community,? said Mayor Mrakas in his motion. ?There is a recognized need to support property owners in maintaining and restoring heritage buildings and sites. A Heritage Grant program would provide financial assistance to property owners for the preservation and restoration of heritage properties.

?Such a program could contribute to the overall preservation and enhancement of our Town's historical character and cultural identity.?

The Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) reviewed the idea of the grant program at their last meeting before the summer recess.

While supportive of the initiative, they said any money that is put forward through this program should start with façade improvements before gradually expanding in accordance with the program's success, and there should be clear lines drawn between residential properties and those that are now home to commercial businesses.

?Some of the residents who own heritage homes have expressed to me their challenges with keeping their home up,? said HAC member David Heard. ?I think this fund, as it's developed, should be a little more specific to start with facades as a priority. Esthetics, especially with heritage, is everything, [particularly] if you want to draw in tourism.?

This was a view largely shared by John Green, a member of both HAC and the Aurora Historical Society.

?I think this is an excellent idea,? said Green. ?I believe if one particular property is looking shabby, and if they were able to participate and receive some money to spruce up the front of their building to make it more attractive, word would soon spread around to other people who have similar properties and cannot afford to keep it up to what it should be looking like. If they could say, ?If we can apply for this, get some money, and we can go ahead and do it,? I think word would spread very rapidly and the Town would benefit as a result of this.?

On the subject of focusing initially on facades, HAC member Bob McRoberts agreed it's better to start with ?tight guidelines.?

?It reminds me of discipline in the classroom,? said the former teacher and education trustee. ?It's good to be tough in the beginning and ease up as the years go on. Start small, have tight guidelines, and perhaps in the second year more is allowed.?

Supporting moving forward was Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese who said people need to ?treat heritage as an asset not a liability.?

?If you have an asset, you have to take care of that asset,? he said. ?If the asset happens to be in private hands, it's a little dicey that way, but I think if we have a long-term plan, five or ten years, where a certain amount of money is going to be put into a pot, so to speak, and once that's been depleted for the year, they wait for the next one and the next one because we're hoping the heritage is going to last for a while.?

By Brock Weir