

It's the end of the line for Collis Leather building



By Brock Weir

After over 100 years on Tyler Street, it is the end of the line for Collis Leather.

Following a series of lengthy discussions, reviews, and analysis, Council approved the demolition of the former tannery 8 ? 1 at Council last week. The decision will eventually pave the way for a development of new townhouses on the site, and provide an opportunity to remediate the site, long-contaminated from the chemicals used in leather production, which has been of concern to the neighbouring community for decades.

Collis Leather began operations on Tyler Street in 1912. Over the intervening decades, the site was expanded and modified until the leather operations ceased in 1988. From that time until last year, the gradually deteriorating building was owned by Maple Leaf Foods and leased out as office and storage space.

In considering the building's future, Councillor Sandra Humfryes, vice chair of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC), was the lone holdout. The information before Council was inadequate to make an informed decision.

?Normally, we get why the building needs to be demolished, not just from an environmental perspective,? she said. ?It is a very unique situation. In this case, the developer is great at what they do from an environmental perspective, taking brown space and making it safe, making it a great area moving forward and I absolutely support that, but I need to understand the engineering elements of this building and why it is not significant enough to keep.?

The HAC recommended against the demolition of the building earlier in September. While support for retaining the building in principle was relatively muted around the HAC table, with the Committee split on whether it had any future use at all, the majority of the members decided they needed to stick with the mandate of their committee regardless of environmental concerns.

As far as the contamination cleanup goes, developers argue that the building has to go to get right to the heart of the matter and truly remediate the site.

This was a view shared by HAC co-chair Councillor John Abel, who also voiced his support of the developers coming in.

?I am just thrilled we have a developer that is an expert on brownfield coming to our Town to do a fantastic thing on the tannery, take a sore spot and create some homes for the middle of our Town,? said Councillor Abel. ?It is very important to our residents. Their homes are going to be increasing in value and they want to make sure what is going on. I think it is just a fantastic opportunity

for our Town to remediate what has been an eyesore and I don't want to do anything but welcome them with open arms to proceed.?

Councillor Don Constable shared this view, adding having the developer come in and take on the responsibility for remediating the site shoulders what could have been a costly risk for the Town of Aurora.

?They're asking for our support to let this building come down and finally put it out of its misery because it has been a tear-down for a long time,? he said. ?The building really is unsafe and I would guarantee the racoons wouldn't even move in there. It has got to come down for them to continue on, remove the soil, make the property safe, and take it from there.?

There is some comfort to be taken, he added, in the fact the future of the site will be up for consideration of further reports and recommendations within the next 18 months, but it is time for the ball to get rolling. This was a view Councillor Evelyn Buck said she subscribed to, particularly of the developer taking on the risk.

?This is someone who is taking a risk and making a huge investment, and there is no guarantee that at the end of that investment he will be able to realise some of that investment,? said Councillor Buck. ?I can think of no logical argument [for a delay] whatsoever. We have already talked about other sites in the Downtown area that have sat vacant for 40 years?and no interest in developing any of them because they are difficult sites, and yet none of them are more key than this for residential development.

?To be having any misgivings?doesn't make any sense to me.?

Although supportive of the demolition, Councillor Michael Thompson was slightly more cautious with his enthusiasm. He said he agreed with Councillor Humfries that there was still some information missing to inform his own decision, but in his own research he came around to supporting the move.

?There is no guarantee that if we ask for more information or push for lofts [to be created in the existing building] that it is even feasible, but I think we have an opportunity before us and it behoves us to take it and move forward with what has been proposed,? he said. ?As much as we would love to save any kind of landmark, I don't know whether or not there is enough information to prove it is feasible to make lofts, or else it will just sit and possibly deteriorate.?

For Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, moving forward with the proposal on the table is acting ?in a responsible manner? to clean the site up. No municipality would want a brownfield in their Town and it is their ?obligation? to do something about it. And, in doing so, there would also be offshoot benefits.

?What I think we haven't addressed is what it could mean to Downtown revitalization,? said Mayor Dawe. ?By bringing this forward and having some increased unique housing opportunities would not only [benefit our] tax base but the businesses in the Downtown Core. I can't imagine how much money it would take to try and fix [that building] up and bring it to any kind of usable standards.?