

Old works yard could breathe new life into Hillary House, neighbourhood



Erika Mazanik, curator for the Aurora Historical Society, puts the finishing touches on 'From The Doctor's House: A Glimpse into the Koffler Museum of Medicine', the latest installment in the Aurora Cultural Centre's Community As Curator Heritage Exhibition program. From The Doctor's House runs through November 29. Auroran photo by Brock Weir

By Brock Weir

Hillary House, Aurora's only National Historic Site, could get a new lease on life thanks to a potential grant to mark 2017's Canada 150 celebration and one of the Town's old works yards.

Councillors are set this week to give the green light to supporting in principle an application by the Aurora Historical Society to the Ontario Trillium Foundation to convert part of the Town's works storage yard on Machell Avenue into a new parking lot and access point to Hillary House.

A new parking lot and access will assist the Aurora Historical Society promoting and hosting larger events at Hillary House as well as additional fundraising opportunities to aid in maintaining this historic landmark, said Parks Manager Jim Tree in his report to Council. The Trillium Grant and land lease provides an excellent opportunity to leverage funding for this important project and demonstrates a strong partnership between the Municipality and a dedicated community group.

Supporting the Aurora Historical Society's funding application in principle received the wide support of Councillors at the Committee level last week, emphasising the fact this yard is currently used largely to store garbage picked up at community centres and parks, as well as felled street trees, all of which will eventually be moved to the new Joint Operations Centre on Industrial Parkway North.

But some Councillors wondered if the plan to lease just over 1,000 square metres of space to the Aurora Historical Society for this project could be expanded into something with a larger vision.

I think it is a great idea, said Councillor Michael Thompson. I think Hillary House can absolutely benefit from more parking. It is tough to get in from Yonge and there have been issues with school groups and everything else. But also, we do have an opportunity once we vacate those lands with our parks responsibilities to perhaps use this land for additional parking for Machell or additional parking. There are opportunities here beyond what we're seeing in this rendering for additional parking and Town uses.

Councillor Tom Mrakas said he was of a similar view, adding additional parking for the Aurora Community Centre into the mix.

While Mayor Geoff Dawe was also supportive of the possibilities, he threw in a note of caution, highlighting issues the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority had as recently as two years ago of carrying out changes in the area, which lies on a flood plain.

“If the Conservation authority will support it I certainly would encourage Council to support it,” he said.

Councillor Harold Kim was also enthusiastic but cautious. For the Councillor, who recently spoke about looking at ways to increase revenues for the Town's Cultural Partners “the Historical Society being one of them” partnering on this project is a logical next step.

“It is hard to promote an institution you're trying to bring more visitors to and I find that we have talked about Aurora and its brand, how we're going to promote tourism, and the Historical Society and cultural partners are part of that equation,” he said. “Without really seeing an organization's full potential, you feel wondering how good a cultural partner could perform if given all the adequate resources and I think this qualifies, giving them proper resources to act quickly provide service and build awareness in the community for the AHS and Hillary House.

“I do feel comfortable with supporting the project but without a certain threshold or limitation or restriction, I am a little bit wary. I think given we're unsure of the total cost or what our Town participation might be, or perhaps a restriction that we would not commit more than 60 per cent of the project or something of that nature might be a reasonable request.”

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, on the other hand, said while she wants the Aurora Historical Society to thrive, she was uncomfortable with the timing of the project as consultation has not yet been done with the neighbours, nor has a conceptual design and budget been hammered out.

But, time is of the essence for this first stage in the game, according to CAO Doug Nadorozny who said there is a very narrow window for the Society to secure a Canada 150 grant.

“You can still have public consultation and a proper design process to make sure the project that is finally proposed is satisfactory to Council and the community,” he said.

This satisfied Councillor Gaertner.

“Hearing that, I do agree with the recommendation but I also think the Historical Society needs to know we might only fund part of it and there might be other changes,” she concluded. “We support the Society and will do everything we can, but we will have to go through the budget process.”