

Proposal to move historic home for 10 storey apartment hits Council speedbump



By Brock Weir

It is among the few reminders of the small hamlets that formed what is now Aurora, and now a plan to move the 'Red House' from its 170-year-old foundation at Yonge and St. John's Sideroad to make way for a 10 storey apartment development has raised the ire of Council.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, turned down an application from the current owners of the historic Red House, which most recently found new life as Oakland Hall restaurant, for several bylaw changes which would ultimately pave the way for the large-scale development despite the owners' plans to relocate the building just north to the nearby intersection.

Speaking on behalf of his clients, Chad B. Jean-Baptiste of WSB Canada said his client first met with the Town on the proposal in July 2015, subsequently pitching their idea to Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee in both August of 2016 and the subsequent April.

'We understand that height is an issue,' he said. 'Our client will work to ensure we're well set back from Yonge Street and we're looking to address those types of concerns as part of the site design.'

Should any part of this plan go forward, it is likely that height will indeed be an issue as current zoning bylaws allow for only three storeys in this particular area. At Council's first blush, however, height was the least of their worries - it was all about the heritage not just of the building but the surrounding area as well.

First to take aim at the proposal was Councillor Jeff Thom, who emphasised the importance of the building in 'context.'

Reading from the building's historical designation, he said the Red House, which formerly served as the studio for famed artist Dorothy Clark McClure is, along with Willow Farm across Yonge Street and the Partiger House on the east side of Old Yonge Street, is all that is left of Cosford's Corners, a small settlement which once boasted a number of prosperous farms, a blacksmith, carriage shop, and other amenities.

'From our client's perspective, the context is important,' said Mr. Jean-Baptiste, noting their proposal to move the house to the corner of Yonge and St. John's would add to the prominence of the building.

Councillor Thom, however, was not convinced.

'There are no guarantees when moving a house that was constructed in the mid 19th century that it is going to be successful,' he said. 'We had an application on a designated house that was passed by the previous Council and previous HAC (Heritage Advisory Committee) on Wellington Street where the front façade was supposed to be kept and [developers] guaranteed it would be perfect, and it had to be destroyed because they weren't able to maintain the structural integrity of the building. I want to make it clear the bylaw is specific to the contextual reasons on why this property is an important property to the Town.'

This was a view shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said the HAC was clear they did not want to see the house moved.

'I am quite sure, being at the meeting, the Committee was very opposed to having the Red House moved, so it seems to me like it was a wasted visit for the developer and the committee,' she said.

Other Council members, on the other hand, were more willing to entertain the idea of at least approving this first step to enable the concept to be presented for future consideration and debate at a Public Planning Meeting.

?We often see a lot of developments, and I am talking about the United Church, where we took a significant heritage corner and changed that,? said Councillor Abel. ?I am a bit puzzled [at the opposition because] that was the downtown core and this is the outskirts, but I appreciate the passion. It sounds to me?they are moving it a little bit closer to the corner and it is going to be a little more prominent. This would, in my mind, follow exactly what we're supposed to do. We moved Petch House quite far and reassembled it to preserve that, so the idea of preserving it and putting it on the same property appeals to me.

?I think it is our duty to allow them to at least get to that process and that is the planning meeting. We have been reminded almost every time we do this that it is not the merits of what it is [we're to be discussing] it is just to proceed with the application to the planning process.?

This idea was rejected by Councillor Tom Mrakas who said the merits of the application were already in the report and questioned whether Councillor Abel would have the same mindset if faced with a 20 storey application simply because they had already discussed their proposal with staff.

?You have to look at the merits, you have to make a decision on what's best,? said Councillor Mrakas.

The application was rejected on a 4 ? 2 vote with Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Abel voting in favour of the application. Councillors Harold Kim and Paul Pirri were not in attendance.