

Province puts future of historic college building up in the air



By Brock Weir

It has gone by many names over its first century, whether it is De La Salle College, Pine Ridge hospital, or any number of Provincial departments. Soon, it could add another name to the list: history.

The Province of Ontario has put the wheels in motion to declare the building surplus and put the extensive property on the northwest corner of Yonge and Bloomington up for sale.

Paving the way for a potential land sale, the Ministry of Infrastructure is seeking zoning amendments which would, in turn, allow for the building at its core to be razed and paved over for a new housing development.

This fall, Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) is expected to go through the Province's application, after Council put the brakes on the process following a Public Planning meeting this past spring.

Originally facing a motion to send the application from Public Planning directly to General Committee for subsequent Council approval, Councillors slowed down the process asking not only for a further report from staff to address the many concerns voiced by residents and employees at the building alike, but to send it to HAC for their input as well.

"There is a lot of stuff that needs to be looked at here," said Councillor Jeff Thom, voicing his concerns over heritage aspects of the property, and making the motion to send the matter to HAC. "I am not in favour, at least at this point in time."

The building in question was built in 1915 as the seminary De La Salle College, which housed a Catholic order whose history is reflected in the natural feature, Monk's Walk, which is to be preserved regardless of the fate of the rest of the property.

From 1949 to 1984, the building was Pine Ridge, a controversial Provincial hospital for individuals with developmental disabilities. Pine Ridge was one of a number of similar Provincial institutions subject to a 2015 class action lawsuit for abuses patients suffered behind its walls. The class action lawsuit was settled earlier this year and the resulting \$36 million settlement will be used to provide compensation for residents not only of Pine Ridge, but eleven similar institutions as well.

Following its use as a hospital, the facility was retrofitted for use by the Province as offices for a number of ministries, including the Ministry of Transportation.

Now, those days are all but over and the Province is seeking to strip the property of its "major institutional", "minor institutional" and environmental function area status to permit cluster residential. While the majority of the land currently owned by the Province is deemed undevelopable due to environmental protection, planners for the Province have outlined three different scenarios on how to maximize the land that can be developed.

The first concept shows between 140 and 153 residential units, with 45 single detached houses and up to 108 units within a new apartment building.

The second concept keeps the De La Salle College building in place, with up to 48 apartments built inside, surrounded by up to 14 detached and 88 stacked townhouses.

The third concept does away with the historic building entirely, making room for 44 townhouses and 102 stacked townhouse uses. "They are strictly hypothetical, but they illustrate how modest residential infill could be accommodated on the site without

negatively impacting the important views and vistas, and it will complement the overall character of the area and make good use of the existing urban infrastructure and services in the area," said Amy Shepherd of IBI Group presenting the options to Council. As this is, at the moment, strictly a hypothetical situation, there is still a process the Province will need to go through. First the 13.3 hectares need to be formally deemed surplus and sold, a sale which will be offered in a hierarchy first to other Provincial ministries, then to the Region of York, the Town, and followed by other non-profits.

This process, she estimated, could take up to a year.

Surrounding lands have already been declared surplus, with the Town of Aurora's expression of interest in the land for new parkland the bid favoured by the Province.

The three hypotheticals have, so far, garnered mixed reactions from members of the public, largely negative.

These concerns range from preserving the environmental features of the land, worries over increased residential density in the area, storm water impacts, potential graves on-site purported to be the resting places of some of the monks and seminarians from the De La Salle College days, lost employment opportunities, and various issues of historical interest.

"There were two major institutions that had a lot to do with the history of your community and I think that should be taken into consideration," said Jeff Andersen, who works at 50 Bloomington. "One of the things we're trying to find are grave sites of some of the brothers that worked there and the proposals are going right over them. We would have to find the grave sites before we can continue on. Take that storied history into consideration."

Added Asha Fortini, "Once I left home, I really wanted to continue living in Aurora, raise my family in Aurora, and work in Aurora. I have been lucky that I have been able to do so. It affords me quite a bit of work-life balance. On my lunch hours I can run out and get that birthday gift I forgot and I am shopping in Aurora. I can grab my groceries on my way home and I am doing that in Aurora. It was a very deliberate decision to work and continue to reside in Aurora? it would be a very crucial decision on if I would continue to live in Aurora to work and raise my family."

While Council members agreed there are many more questions that need to be answered before they can weigh in further, some expressed concerns that changing existing zoning on the property is really the Province asking the Municipality for help in realising the maximum profit from the sale of their land.

"There is a lot of uncertainty over the future development of the site," said Councillor Michael Thompson, drawing parallels to a recent application to rezone the land on which the former south Aurora Canadian Tire, now for sale, is located.

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: "While this is not for sale per se, we all understand it is going to be deemed surplus. That is why they are here looking for an amendment to optimise the best use but at the end of the day it is also to increase the profit. I don't think [it is up to us to make an amendment] just to increase the profit margin so I am not in favour."