

Study could lead to new approach to Downtown revitalization

By Brock Weir

A study to look at what it would take for the Town of Aurora to secure historic and vacant properties along Yonge Street could lead to new approaches to revitalizing Aurora's Downtown Core, according to some Councillors.

Council voted 8 ? 1 last week to investigate a potential purchase price for historic Horton Place, which is situated on the northwest corner of Yonge Street at Irwin Avenue, as well as the two properties immediately north and south of the house, with a potential eye to spurring positive development and growth in Aurora's historic centre. Council's approval also came with the direction of a full review of liabilities and risks that would be part and parcel of such a purchase.

The investigation is a result of a motion brought forward by Councillor John Abel. He said he believed it is the role of municipalities like Aurora to add to their land reserves with an eye towards heritage, culture, business and commercial uses.

He stressed all he wanted was for Town Staff to look at potential purchase costs rather than committing any funds. In looking at revitalization plans in other places, municipal involvement was key and Aurora needs to decide whether or not it plays a role here.

?This would be, in my mind, the first step going forward, putting in some valuable land right off Yonge Street in our core,? said Councillor Abel.

?You can wait for private developers to come and do it piecemeal, but if we grab parcels of land together, the opportunities are that much greater and will keep a lot more interest in development. We will also send a message that we are prepared to move forward with revitalization and it is a commitment.

?Purchasing land is not high risk, in my opinion. If there is a failure, we are not committing any money to develop the land. We're only committing to purchase the land. The risk of failure to look at purchasing key properties in bulk, I think, is minimal compared to opportunities and potential that exist.?

First to lend her support was Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said it was the ?absolute right thing to do.? Harkening back to comments made in the last term of Council towards the failed ?Hillary-McIntyre Park? idea to acquire Horton Place and the two properties to its north, including Hillary House, for a ?heritage park?, she said while she liked that initial idea, this is a step forward.

While they ultimately voted in favour of the motion, the enthusiasm of some Councillors was more tempered. Councillor Harold Kim, for instance, said while it is one thing to move forward with evaluating the properties, the question of what Aurora would then do with them weighed on him.

?It would be nice if staff could also come back to us looking one step ahead [to see] how much it would cost to maintain the properties while we are debating on what we can do with the properties,? said Councillor Kim. ?I would hate for us to purchase the land and then have to spend tens of thousands maintaining the properties while debating for a year or two, or three, what is going to happen.?

Councillor Jeff Thom, on the other hand, said a report would help in having all options on the table when making a final decision, but time could be of the essence.

?You don't choose what properties go up for sale and I think if Council wants to have a long-term vision for what the Downtown Core needs to be, then you need to look at acquiring the properties.?

From the perspective of Councillor Michael Thompson, moving forward with the concept of looking at new ways to revitalize Downtown Aurora is good, and the role of Council to examine all those opportunities, he didn't want to lose sight of other

revitalization opportunities also on the table, such as the future of Library Square on Victoria Street at Church. An extra step was needed in the process, he noted, to address these concerns.

"I would like to see a step in between where there is that information piece around that strategy [but] I don't want us to lose our focus with regards to Library Square," he said. "We have a number of different initiatives all costing dollars. I don't want this decision made in isolation of what we're doing overall. I think it is the right thing to explore and investigate, and have that conversation."

The dissenting voice to the plan came from Councillor Wendy Gaertner. While she does want to see revitalization of the Downtown Core, something she has spoken of for many years, she objected to Council's conversation taking place out in the open, calling the process "inappropriate."

"We had a very intensive closed session discussion on this property," said Councillor Gaertner of the two properties north of Irwin. "We had the advice of a consultant, we did a lot of work on this last term but we decided as a Council for many reasons, in particular the condition of one of the buildings, the amount of money we would have to put in of the taxpayers' money. I think there were so many issues that made us decide this was not the appropriate way to go, and I am without words."