

United Church members feel 'definite excitement' as Council approves site plans for rebuild



By Brock Weir

It took over four years to get to that point, but when it came for Council to approve site plans for the planned rebuild of Aurora United Church, the decision was made in under two minutes.

Granted, a healthy discussion over the matter took place at the previous week's General Committee, but the speedy approval left dozens of Aurora United Church (AUC) parishioners buzzing with excitement as they left Council chambers 'glad that they had cleared this very important hurdle, but also focused on the two major hurdles still ahead.

'It was a very encouraging, positive, happy first step for the congregation,' said Bill Newman, Chair of the AUC Parish Council. 'We have our site plan approval now, and yes, we have zoning approvals and building plans ahead of us, but the way is now clear. We're moving forward and hopefully beginning construction very soon. There is definite excitement in the air. It has really uplifted the congregation to hear this news and it is a real tangible first sign that we're moving ahead, recognizing the stages we have ahead.'

The most immediate steps on the horizon are relocating a Bell Canada line on the site, as well as continued archeological work. As work continues, more remains from a very early pioneer cemetery continue to be uncovered, remains which will be reinterred with dignity later this year at the Aurora Cemetery in the south end of Town as part of the AUC's 200th Anniversary celebrations.

As such, they will be reinterred with dignity, along with a suitable marker on where these individuals came from.

Their names, however, have been lost to time. The cemetery in question was closed in the late 1860s and family members of those interred there were required at that time to claim their loved ones' remains if they wished them to be reinterred elsewhere, but evidently several individuals were left behind.

Many of these bodies were uncovered on a wedge of land which separated the previous Aurora United Church building, which was destroyed by a devastating fire in April 2014, from a number of Victorian homes just to the east.

These houses were razed earlier this year by the Parish to make way not only for the modern church rebuild, but also for a seven-storey retirement home complex that will be built in conjunction with the place of worship.

These rebuild plans have been spearheaded by the AUC's Building Committee, under the leadership of Brian North.

Mr. North hailed last week's Council decision as a 'huge hurdle' cleared.

Once those other two hurdles are clear, he said he is hopeful they will be able to break ground.

'It is a battle when you're trying to please everybody,' said Mr. North of the redesign plans. 'It is going to change the downtown core. We know that. But for the United Church, it is a necessity to partner with (planners) Succession and make this happen. We're

working really hard on [the internal design and addressing community needs]. We're working weekly as a committee and we're trying to make it inclusive for the whole Town so there are rooms to rent, board rooms, halls and all kinds of access for the whole kind of Aurora and make it a community hub, not just a church. Number one is the sanctuary, number two is the church, but we want to open it up to the whole community. We're trying to get all the plans together and then we're going to bring it to the congregation and some key people.?

Equally enthusiastic about last Tuesday's site plan approvals were AUC leaders Reverends Andy Comar and Lorraine Newton Comar.

?We're just thrilled we had unanimous support for the site plans and on we go for the structural designs and the building permits,? said Andy.

Both leaders attended Tuesday night's Council meeting and Lorraine said she could feel the ?excitement' in the air, which culminated in thunderous applause.

?There was relief and joy,? she said, the following evening. ?It was another marker for the church and it is really positive. We all gathered outside Town Hall after for some happy moments. There are a lot of steps [ahead], way more than we ever imagined, but I think we're doing fairly well, four years later. Every little bit forward is a really good moment for the congregation. We're still here, we're still strong, we're pressing forward, and our future is bright. Our intention is to go home to Yonge Street.?

Added Andy: ?And we will.?