

Wedding bells could ring within historic Petch House

Petch House, the oldest house in Aurora still standing, could see a new lease on life as a wedding chapel.

The historic log house, which was moved from its original site near Leslie Street and Wellington Street East and, ten years ago, restored and rebuilt just behind the Aurora Seniors' Centre on John West Way, has been in search of a permanent use since it was re-dedicated.

In the years since, the Town has employed it for a range of uses. Occasionally used as a space for storage, it is also deployed as a resource at municipal events, such as a place for the Easter Bunny to meet kids during the annual Hello Spring affair.

Its use as a venue for municipal wedding ceremonies was first floated at Council in 2018 and lawmakers recently reviewed a feasibility report on how to make it happen.

“Current demand and expanding Civil Ceremony services demonstrates an opportunity for Petch House,” said Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services, in her report to Council. “Since 2018, and even with a pandemic impacting possible interest, the Town's provision of civil ceremonies continues to rise. During the pandemic, the Town of Aurora was one of few municipalities that continued to offer and perform civil ceremonies in a small and safe intimate style to meet current trends for basic ceremonies, interfaith ceremonies and legal ceremonies for larger destination weddings.

“Stats have shown that the demand for this type of basic wedding service are on a favourable incline; notably the Town conducted 45 civil ceremonies.”

Municipal services currently take place in Council Chambers and the report notes that this room has limited availability of one day per week “Fridays” where the equipment that gives it the feel of a chapel has to be put up and taken down accordingly. Petch House could expand availability while also giving the Town the ability to keep the set-up in place. Increased availability, notes McDougall, could also result in increased revenue to the Town.

“Petch House is a desirable location for small weddings due to its central location to Town Hall, local restaurants, highway access points and natural green space for wedding photos. Guests would check in at Town Hall with Access Aurora and the delegated wedding officiant would accompany the wedding party to the Petch House to conduct the service. Petch House would also be well-used for pictures along [the Aurora Community Arboretum].

“Based on the short duration of each civil ceremony (less than 30 minutes per service) it would be staff's recommendation to proceed with minimal improvements to the Petch House. Further additional enhancements could be considered if demand for civil ceremonies continues to rise; however, for the current expected use, a minimal level of work is needed to make this space a functioning wedding chapel that is marketable for the current trends in the wedding service industry “rustic, private/intimate, wedding-ready with no additional cost of rentals for couples looking for a small space.”

Should the recommendations proceed, \$50,000 would be needed to make basic improvements to the structure to suit the purpose, such as additional lighting, an accessibility ramp, a security system and an upgraded floor. All of this would be funded from money already in reserves.

At the most recent Council meeting, lawmakers were generally positive about the suggestion but wanted to make sure there was a community buy-in, particularly from members of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC).

“Members of HAC from a few years ago got in touch with me and said they felt that the commercial use of Petch House was not to be done,” said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese. “I understand that people change, things change, the HAC changed and I didn't see (in the report) that HAC was consulted prior to this.”

McDougall said three of six members of the current HAC were at the table last term as well and provided their input.

?They had their caution and concerns, for sure, but to proceed with it being hosted or used as a wedding chapel, they were fine with,? she said. ?But they definitely would like to see it again. That was something we committed to do ? based on any design elements, we would be taking it back to this term's HAC for their comments.?

Council agreed to send it back to HAC particularly, as Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson noted, the report leaves the door open to further options for Petch House down the road.

?This would also give them the opportunity to talk about not just what's currently being proposed, but whether or not more considerations should be going on to future use or expansion of Petch House as well.?

Councillor Weese agreed, adding that he believed that once a use is established it's not likely to go back.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Report