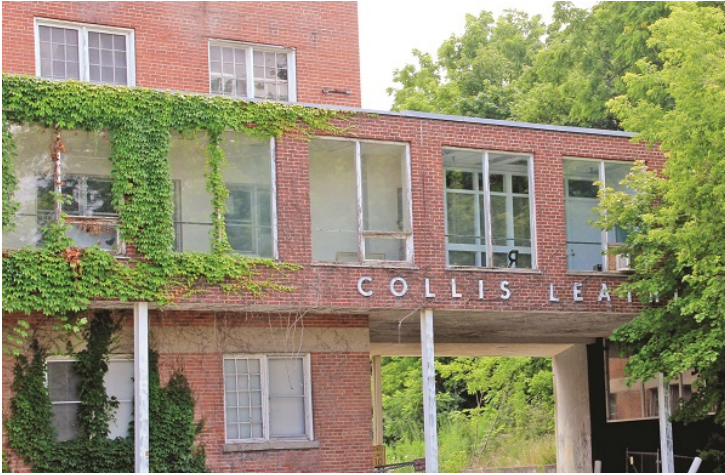


You can't clean up Collis Leather site without knocking down the building: developers



By Brock Weir

Council will make a decision this week on the long-debated future of the Collis Leather factory.

The Tyler Street Tannery, which shut down operations nearly 30 years ago and subsequently used as leased office space, has sat empty for over a year. Sold in 2013 by Maple Leaf Foods, the property is now owned by developers who plan to demolish the existing building, remediate any contamination on the property, and build a series of slab-on-grade townhouses in the area.

Representatives from the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority are due at Town Hall this week to make their respective pitches to Council on what construction on this site means to the environment and the surrounding watercourses, in light of the hefty soil contamination believed on the site from dumping there during decades of leather processing.

Joanne Barnett, representing the developers, told Councillors at last week's General Committee meeting that the LSRCA was on board with the project, but some Councillors said there was not enough information in front of them to make a proper decision on whether or not to allow the demolition.

“It is unusual for us to be dealing with an issue that just came before the Committee the night before, but I understand the urgency,” said Councillor Michael Thompson, referencing a meeting of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee the night before which recommended against the demolition from a purely historical and architectural perspective. “However, I am in a little bit of a struggle here because there is really no information in front of me other than what was presented by the consultant and there's a few statements she makes with regards to the fact the building can't be salvaged, the LRSCA is on board, and it would be nice to have some of that information to corroborate some of those issues that help make a decision around it.

“It is a significant issue and I would have a great comfort level with the opportunity to read and digest some of that information.”

While Councillor Sandra Humfries, co-chair of the Heritage Advisory Committee, agreed more information was in order before this week's meeting, many Councillors disagreed, arguing time was of the essence considering this will be the final Council meeting before the October 27 municipal election, and the sooner developers can start remediating the site the better it will be for the surrounding neighbourhood and the Town as a whole.

“Here is a 70 acre site in the heart of our Town,” said Councillor Evelyn Buck. “It is enjoying police protection, fire protection, snow plowing, sidewalk plowing, street lighting, parks in the neighbourhood and contributing absolutely nothing to the costs of all

of those services, and it hasn't contributed for at least 20 years. It has been sitting there completely under-utilized, waiting for someone to come along, prepared to make an investment, take the risk and remediate the property to make it usable?and we have the Advisory Committee, who have no responsibility for anything except their own romantic notions of what is valuable on that property. What history? The heritage is long-gone and it doesn't provide employment any longer.?

These feelings were echoed by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and Councillor Don Constable.

For Mayor Dawe, a recent tour of the building confirmed in his mind that the Collis Leather building is ?long-past any useful life.?

?It is a Catch-22,? he said. ?The site needs to be remediated, but we can't remediate it unless we tear it down, so I think we have some overall responsibility to ensure that we are protecting our watercourses and waterways, so I think that dictates that we're going to have to move forward on it. I see no redeeming features for this building whatsoever and I think if we have got someone who is willing to take the risk to see if we can't move this along and see if we can make it into something much better than it is, I think we should be going with it.?

Added Councillor Constable: ?I know how costly this is, the site has been vacant for many years. It probably continues to be an eyesore for the neighbourhood, but when you have a competent firm that is willing to put in the time and the money to basically take this off our hands and do all this remediation work, we could have had that building stuck on our inventory for us to have to worry about someday right in the centre of Town. I think it is crazy. It is an 18-month process. This is the first step I think we have to make.?

Although she did not speak particularly to the merits of whether or not to demolish the building, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she objected to the tone around the table stemming from HAC's recommendation not to proceed with the demolition from a heritage perspective.

?There is a lot of heritage in Aurora, there is a lot of history that needs to be protected and respected,? she said. ?I know that this Committee has worked very hard this term and I don't think they should be maligned in any way. I think they should simply be thanked.?