

\$10m downtown Heritage Park plans up for debate next month

By Brock Weir

A proposed heritage park in northeast Aurora will come forward for further discussion in February as Councillors considered Hillary-McIntyre Park this week.

Councillors will be asked to authorise staff to begin negotiations for the sale of Hillary House to the Town of Aurora, as well as the two properties immediately to its south for a four acre 'heritage park.'

The park concept has been incubating for nearly two years and its proponents have a vision of a \$10 million project that would combine the three properties into a heritage mecca, with the two buildings on either end remaining largely the same but the central building being overhauled into museum and exhibition space, offices, and an events centre.

Council provided funding for consultants to undertake a feasibility study on the project and what has come forward this week is a slight deviation from the original plan, such as an emphasis for commercial use within the central property including 'wellness' endeavours like a retirement centre.

Proponents of the plan had a vision requiring a mix of private fundraising, Federal and Provincial grants, with the balance of funding coming from Aurora's Hydro Reserves, which now hover in the area of \$34 million.

Their vision includes a mix of private fundraising, federal and provincial grants, and a large chunk of the vision being funded by Aurora's Hydro Reserve funds which now hover in the area of \$34 million.

Although Councillors are expected to discuss the price tags of the respective properties behind closed doors, the study compares Horton Place to similar properties which have realised a market value anywhere between the high \$900,000s and \$2.5 million.

Hillary House is currently owned by the Aurora Historical Society. Horton Place is owned by historian John McIntyre who has told proponents he is willing to sell his family home at below market value to ensure its historical integrity.

Although proponents of the Hillary-McIntyre plan said there was an 'urgency' on realtor Bruce Spragg's part to determine the future his Readman House, there has been no activity on the building. Previous plans for the central site have included a small-scale townhouse development.

Councillors will consider a cost benefit study on the site to determine the project's feasibility.

'In the consultant's view, the purchase of [Horton Place and Readman House] represents a strategic purchase, with long-term benefits to the Town that are likely to significantly outweigh the costs of purchase,' said Aurora CAO Neil Garbe in his report to Council. 'The conclusion is the result of a broad analysis of the properties themselves, their condition and contribution to the heritage of the Town, the range of public and private opportunities which adaptive re-use can achieve, the capital costs associated with the purchases relative to their market value, and ongoing operating liabilities.'

Summarizing the report from Bray Consultants and Sierra Planning, Mr. Garbe concludes Aurora buying the three properties would not only allow the Town to preserve a large swath of Yonge Street land for the public, but also be a strategic purpose considering current and future development and intensification in the Yonge Street corridor north of Wellington Street.

This, he said, would 'outweigh any concerns' that purchasing the land would 'create a precedent for municipal purchase of any privately held property of heritage value.'

Looking at the other side of the coin, he paints a bleak picture of the 'loss' that could result by passing up the land, including neglect and redevelopment, and the further 'isolation' of Hillary House 'due to limited visitation.'

?In this instance, the Town is likely to continue the process of losing its most important heritage properties in the area, adding Horton Place and Readman House to the unfortunate tally of Inglehurst, Castle Doan, and Doan Hall. Attempts to provide the original Downtown with a distinct identity are made more difficult and efforts to enhance the pedestrian experience are challenged by the lack of an anchor destination at the north end.?

In the extensive debates and presentations that have been made both to Council and Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee, questions have continually come up in the range of can Aurora afford the price tag and where's the money coming from. Some Councillors, including Councillor Evelyn Buck who has characterised this as a ?real estate deal?, have questioned the motives and benefits of the plan.

The report argues the economic potential is there to justify the properties including further economic development including the draw of heritage and cultural attractions.

?Having Hillary House as an established heritage attraction within the proposed park is a very important factor in the park's long-term economic viability,? he said.

?New development has already begun on nearby lands to the south and this trend is likely to continue in the near future as demand increases and infrastructure is improved. Establishing a signature property here will not only encourage high quality development in the vicinity, it will also increase the value of the property itself.?