

Alarm bells raised over remains of Aurora's last "Doan" house



By Brock Weir

Alarm bells have been raised at Council over the future of Aurora's last surviving legacy of the historically prominent Doan Family ? and engineers will now be tasked with seeing if the remains of the building can be saved for future generations.

What's left of the house, located on Wellington Street East next to the former home of the Aurora Post Office, was originally slated to be incorporated into a new apartment complex planned to be built around it, following a proposal approved by Council, but the property owners and their engineers have said this now might not be structurally feasible.

According to a report before the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) last month, concerns about the structural stability of the remaining structure were first voiced by the property owners on August 5.

?The owner has undertaken several measures to protect the remaining structure in anticipation of the proposed development,? said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, in his report to the committee. ?On July 30, the owners' consultant submitted a report [concluding] that the existing structure does not meet the standards for masonry construction.?

Gary Templeton, representing the property owner, told the committee the ?serious problems? found in the building would jeopardize the plan to attach it to the planned apartment development and, instead, the owners would replicate the façade in its new construction.

The HAC, however, decided not to make a decision just yet, recommending Council approve a third-party peer review ?to be conducted with experience in the preservation of heritage buildings? hired by the Town and paid for by the property owner, to determine how the front façade can be saved ? and that is just what Council did last week.

In making their decision, Councillors expressed their alarm and disappointment that structural problems are being found this late in the game.

?I don't believe the scope of the work was to find out whether or not they could keep the structure in ways they hadn't thought of or reported back on yet; it was simply whether or not they could keep things as is,? said Councillor Jeff Thom, a member of HAC. ?They didn't ask him to explore whether or not it could be kept or what could be done. There was no other way for us to determine whether the façade could be kept.

?We felt that ? although it wasn't unanimous ? until you can demonstrate all other avenues to save the façade have been exhausted, we wouldn't be agreeable to having that façade ripped down. If they have to do another study, it shouldn't be the Town to have to pay for it because, in our opinion, it should have been done in the first place. The onus is on them to demonstrate that no matter what

you do, that thing has to come down.?

This was a sentiment shared by many members of Council, including Councillor John Abel, who served on HAC in the last term of Council, who said he believes the demolition crew took down more of the building than they should have. Mr. Ramunno, however, poured cold water on this view, stating they had demolished what was agreed to by Council in 2013, underpinning the rest to try to save it with bracing in place.

?They took away half of what I thought was being preserved and it looks very weak,? said Councillor Abel. ?I am not an engineer, but it looks like they want to see this fall. One way to do that is take half the structure and leave it for a heavy wind. I am a bit perturbed at what I am seeing. It looks like they're staging for the rest of it to come down.?

He was not alone ? this view was shared by Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who also served on the committee in the last term of Council when this plan was approved. She said she as ?very concerned? with this property and has been ?panicking? watching it unfold.

?An engineer with some experience in historical architecture and preserving it should have been hired in the very beginning, not just an engineer, and that is why I think [the property owners] should be liable,? added Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?I am very disappointed because this is the Charles Doan House, the only one remaining, and on our main streets. It really is a shame it has come to this and I just don't know how that was left to happen.?

Other Councillors, however, were less enthusiastic with saddling the property owner with the costs of another engineering study. Councillor Tom Mrakas, for instance, said he agreed with it in principle, but if the Town-hired engineer came back with the same conclusions, the property owner shouldn't have to shoulder the cost.

Councillor Michael Thompson, on the other hand, said it is important to be ?clear? on why Council is asking for a third-party review because these requests are often made at Town Hall. Highlighting similar requests made by residents surrounding the former Highland Gate Golf Course on plans to redevelop the land, it could set a precedent.

?I think it is important to be able to clearly identify why this case is different than the other cases we have,? he said. ?I am a little concerned we don't have a policy or any guidelines to steer the decision-making with regards to this.?

The house in question was built by David Wilson Doan, the one-time postmaster, in the 1870s, part of a cluster of homes in the vicinity owned by the Doan Family, including Castle Doan, demolished in 1982, and Doan Hall, demolished in 1969.

Calls to Mr. Templeton were not returned by press time.