

## UPDATED: Rebuilding fund established for Aurora United Church



**By Brock Weir**

UPDATED: A rebuilding fund has been set up to take donations for Aurora United Church. People interested in contributing to the "Aurora United Church Rebuilding Fund" are now being accepted through the Bank of Montreal in account number 03038976766.

Demolition crews are undertaking the difficult task of bringing down portions of Aurora United Church after a blaze reduced the nearly 140-year-old Aurora landmark to ruins on Friday.

The Aurora United Church was located at the foot of Church Street and Yonge Street, and had been the spiritual home for over seven generations of Aurora residents.

Volunteers were beginning to arrive at the church on Friday morning to prepare for Palm Sunday services, while children played in the off-site day care centre when the blaze broke out on the roof of a recent addition to the building.



CYFS Deputy Fire Chief Paul Leslie, accompanied by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Frank Klees, update the media amid the smoke just

after 3 p.m.

Roofers were undertaking restoration work at the time, combatting a series of leaks which had already been impacting the church.

The alarm was sounded with a call to 9-1-1 at approximately 10.25 a.m. with reports of a structural fire at the church. When the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), York Regional Police, and York Region EMS arrived on the scene, smoke was visible coming from the roof, but the fire soon began to rage.

“Our first crews arriving to set up made an aggressive attempt to knock the fire down,” said CYFS Deputy Chief Paul Leslie. “Our crews acted very diligently and acted quickly to try and suppress the fire, recognizing church fires are very difficult to fight once they get going. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to get a leg up on it.”

Business owners, area residents, and students on their lunch breaks gathered in alleys along Yonge Street, and lined Tyler Street and Temperance Street to watch the landmark, for some, their life-long place of worship, burn. Spectators were eventually moved off Tyler Street once it became engulfed in black smoke.

By the early afternoon, it was clear the fire crews were fighting a losing battle against the blaze.

“We had to pull our crews back as a result of deteriorating conditions with the fire. Eventually the fire worked its way through the roof,” said Leslie, noting they then had to deploy their aerial streams of water directly onto the church roof. “The nature and the types of these fires was such it was very difficult to get to the scene of the fire with the roof structure still in place. It is a conundrum because you can’t get at it from inside and you can’t get at it from the outside until the roof starts to give way. When the roof at the rear started to collapse, that exposed the rear side and we were able to put it out quickly.”



The heavy beams which characterized the inside of the church were reduced to cinders as fire gutted the historic landmark. “Once the rear roof started to collapse, we were actually able to get into the scene of the fire with our hose streams and did a very effective job of knocking the fire back down. Unfortunately, the fire progressed through to the main roof of the church and as that started up to the main interior, it fuelled the fire more and it started to build across the front of the church as well.”

Nearly 70 firefighters were on the scene to fight the blaze, not only from the CYFS, but also crews from King Township, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury, and Vaughan. Additional crews were also brought in from Georgina and Markham to help cover the rest of the area normally serviced by the CYFS.

York Regional Police and EMS were at the scene from the start, also helping to direct traffic after Yonge Street was closed from Wellington Street to Kennedy.

Several surrounding businesses were closed, and six homes were evacuated.

One resident was treated for respiratory problems, and two firefighters were taken to Southlake for observation after receiving minor injuries with irritants.

The Aurora Public Library was also closed due to the fire, as was the Aurora Cultural Centre, which cancelled the rest of the day’s programming, including a concert.

“It has been a long and difficult challenge to get the fire to where it is,” said Leslie as the fire began to subside around 5.45 p.m.

?We will be on site monitoring it and making sure it is out and dealing with smoldering embers inside.

?We have representatives from the property's insurance company to assist us with any demolition we may need to ensure the fire is completely out. At that point, we will turn it over to the property's agents and they will be providing security on the building to prevent unauthorised access.?

Leslie added he anticipated the cause of fire to be released on Saturday.

?With the cooperation of a number of early witnesses to the fire, I think we will wrap the investigation itself up quite quickly. We have some good witness statements from early stages that will enable us to identify the cause very quickly. The focus of our investigation is going to be the fact the roofers were on the scene working at the time of our arrival.?