

Church Street School addition clears Heritage hurdle

By Brock Weir

The proposed three-storey addition to the historic Church Street School has received a cautious thumbs-up from Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee.

The Committee made their comments ahead of this Thursday's Special Council Meeting at which local lawmakers will decide whether to make the addition, one of the centrepieces of the Library Square redevelopment, official.

The Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) met to review a report from municipal planner Adam Robb, who outlined where design plans stood.

Although Mr. Robb told HAC members that the team behind the proposed building addition, including design firms retained by the Town, have been in close consultation with the Ontario Heritage Trust, which has provided preliminary support for the designs as proposed, as it is a 'major project' there are still some details to hammer out with the Trust, including final design.

When the Committee met, however, designs were top of mind.

'We see this as a very important centre in the Town and hope to do something respectful to add to the Square,' consultants told the group. 'One of the very important principles

[of the building]

is we wanted the building not to exceed the footprint of the existing schoolhouse. We have to be careful to ensure the new building is no taller and we think that is important to defer to the existing building and its importance in the community of Aurora.'

A glazed atrium, as previously presented to Council, will be the link between the old and the new. It will run the full length of the north side of the Church Street School, home to both the Aurora Cultural Centre and Aurora Museum & Archives, and provide a 'break' between the two buildings.

'The places where our building touches the existing building are really quite light,' they said. 'We have a parallel structure outside the wall of the schoolhouse so the north

wall of the schoolhouse remains intact and in place ? just a simple cog joint where the glass comes to meet the stonework at each of those ends.?

The addition, if it is borne to fruition as proposed, will be sheathed in a ?veil? ? currently proposed to be made out of a copper material ? which designers have said is intended to be ?complimentary? to the existing heritage building, while masking some of the infrastructure on the roof line that is necessary to accommodate the second-storey performance hall space.

Committee members were nevertheless concerned with how the new addition will work in conjunction with the heritage building and the neighbourhood that surrounds it.

?The existing building is very historical, but I am wondering how the addition is sympathetic to that history at all,? said HAC member Matthew Kinsella, a builder with a special focus on heritage renovations. The designers said they are not trying to ?emulate? the design of the Church Street School, instead looking to build a sense of ?distinction? between the classic and the modern, and creating a ?dialogue? between the two.

Mr. Kinsella instead suggested alterations to the roof line, leaning more towards a mansard-style roof that is more angular than the proposed flat top, and lines that are consistent with the existing building.

These aesthetic concerns were echoed by fellow HAC member Neil Asselin, who also questioned consultants on the work that has been done so far to ensure the structural integrity of the heritage building.

Consultants said they have engineers working to ensure the structural stability of the building, as well as lingering concerns about the high water table in the area. They deal with these issues frequently, they said, and the team is well-versed in addressing them.

?We did lose a significant building on Wellington Street when they were putting an addition on,? said Mr. Asselin, referring to the former Sormeh Spa building that once stood on Wellington Street East, across from Victoria Street, and has now been rebuilt as an apartment building. ?When they excavated, it compromised the structure, it was devastating and it had to be demolished. So, I am always terrified when we're doing things like this. Knowing what we're dealing with, and I know it says [the Church Street School] will be shored up, but are we prepared for nuclear disaster??

The Church Street School, he added, was ?the jewel in Aurora's crown? that was an ?iconic

landmark? unique within this community.

?We really want to make sure we're not putting
it in some sort of cultural jeopardy,? he concluded.