

Council considers 18 month plan for \$10m Heritage Park

By Brock Weir

A heritage park has a better chance of finding success if it veers towards the private rather than public sector.

That is the message received by Councillors last week at the committee level from consultants tasked with reviewing plans for Hillary-McIntyre Park.

Hillary-McIntyre Park is the brainchild of a group of heritage-minded people in the Town of Aurora looking to bring together three properties on the west side of Yonge Street north of Wellington Street, into a four acre heritage 'destination' combining Hillary House, which is currently owned by the Aurora Historical Society, as well as two privately-owned homes immediately to the south.

This week, Councillors will consider a four-phase approach to purchase the building in question with more information coming forward by May.

The first is appraisals of the properties. The second phase would negotiate the price and terms of the three land transactions, including Hillary House, along with the development of a master plan and 'strategy' outlining 'funding and design opportunities' with 18 months of breathing space to consider all of these options. A third phase would finalize master and business plans while a fourth would entail the implementation of the vision.

Proponents originally came forward with a \$10 million plan, combining some Federal and Provincial dollars with the balance coming from Aurora's Hydro Reserves, to completely overhaul the central property into museum spaces, offices, and a conference centre, and retain the two bookending properties as house museums.

Consultants Jonathan Hack and Carl Bray, however, said last week that is not the best way forward.

'The heritage park development on-site would be more likely to be successful if there was a greater proportion of private sector uses than public ones on the site,' said Mr. Hack. 'The idea of making this a museum space largely is not something, based on our work, we would say would be feasible of minimizing the Town's financial risk in capital development and operations as well.'

Looking towards the three properties as a whole, heritage consultant Carl Bray said purchasing the three properties presented Aurora with a 'gem' of an opportunity combining a national historic site that has already been developed and programmed, with two adjacent properties that have a myriad of options.

'We have come to the conclusion that not acting on this would not be in the long-term benefits of the municipality for a number of reasons,' said Mr. Bray. 'If it is left on its own and sold piecemeal, you lose the synergies of the entire site, which is something we see as really important. It is unlikely that those uses would be synergistic with Hillary House, so the ongoing issues of funding Hillary House would be magnified by non-complimentary development.'

In weighing the various options with private sector investment, consultants zeroed in on a 'Wellness' theme, building not only on Hillary House's beginnings as a doctor's office and its present state of being, in part, a medical museum, but also trends in the public sector overall.

Nevertheless, despite their enthusiasm for a private sector approach, the consultants agreed that the plan would not come without its challenges.

'None of it is straightforward,' said Mr. Hack. 'A property of this nature involves commitment to further work, further analysis and a master plan is one such item. The recommendation to purchase is contingent upon that willingness to move through the process to secure a long-term opportunity for the site.'

In discussions following the consultant's presentation, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe was among Council members expressing some degree of skepticism that the private sector would be lining up to get a piece of the action, given that this plan has been floating in the public realm for almost two years and there hasn't exactly been a lineup forming.

Additional concerns came from Councillors Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo who questioned the risk that would be taken on by the Town as well as any private investor willing to come on board.

More assured in the presentation, however, as Bill Albino, one of the key drivers of this project whose group originally floated the three-building museum concept.

Despite this change in vision, he said he was supportive of the new direction.

Over the decades, he argued, distinct communities like Thornhill have been swallowed up into larger communities, losing their distinct identities. This would provide an opportunity to reverse the trend.

'In Aurora, the commercial community centre has moved to Bayview and, in a large way, the commercial vibrancy of Aurora has moved on,' said Mr. Albino. 'Downtown Aurora must move from being a commercial centre to our social, cultural, spiritual and congregational centre and that is not hard to do. The answer is right here.'

It is time, he added to act on all the visions for Downtown Aurora, including the Aurora Promenade Plan, to buck the trend.

'Downtown Aurora is under duress. It is a distressed-looking place and it is going to be what we want it to be. It will be with Heritage buildings that form museums, there will be heritage buildings that function as stores, restaurants and cafes, heritage buildings that will be at the centre of nightlife. It will be with parks that are places for people to congregate.

'We understand the private sector will have other views, but under the town's control and guidance, we believe what we envision will happen can happen and I think we will make a huge impact on Downtown Aurora in ways that are only now imaginable,' he added, noting that as at least one seller is looking to sell below market value to preserve his property, it represents a 'sweet deal.' 'If you ever had to dispose of this for any reason, it will be the most profitable mistake the Town ever made.'