

Council pushes for heritage buildings to become part of new development

The remaining buildings associated with the Sisman Shoe Company which was, for more than half a century, one of Aurora's largest employers, have won a temporary reprieve from development. But lawmakers are looking for a solution that could offer the best of both worlds.

As The Auroran reported last week, the future of the Sisman Shoe Company, which is represented today by two former factory buildings at 34 and 38 Berczy Street, is up in the air as municipal staff consider its heritage status.

The Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) received a staff recommendation to de-list these properties ? as well as two plots just to the north that are now occupied by two detached homes ? to pave the way for a large condominium and townhouse complex.

As 34 Berczy in particular scored significantly high on an evaluation of its heritage and cultural value to Aurora, the recommendation to delist the building and commemorate its heritage through documentation and a plaque raised significant concerns from committee members.

The process to get to this point, which included the heritage evaluation recommending its designation being pushed to the backburner rather than brought to Council for ratification, was also a key concern around the table.

HAC suggested that rather than let the 34 Berczy meet the wrecking ball, that it be restored and integrated into whatever is ultimately built on the site.

Berczy Street's proximity to the Aurora GO Station, an area identified by the Province of Ontario for growth as a Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) means the area will likely have to be re-developed to meet the Ontario Government's plan, but the ?how? of redevelopment will be key going forward.

Although a report on the building's future as a heritage building is not, according to municipal staff, coming to the Council table in or before September, local lawmakers addressed HAC's concerns at the last Public Planning meeting before the summer recess, calling for more work to be done before it next comes to their attention.

?I am not happy with this development for a number of reasons: the massing is far too large, nothing more than four storeys [should be allowed] from my perspective,? said Councillor Sandra Humfries, who also serves as Council's representative on HAC. ?One of the things that was concerning [at HAC] that I find extremely upsetting is [we] performed a heritage evaluation on the properties and #34 scored very high at 85 per cent. For whatever reason there was a misunderstanding in a staff report and that report evaluation was not accounted for.?

Only Council, she said, can provide direction to change policy and the buildings up for consideration were ?extremely important to the heritage of Aurora.?

?It needs to be incorporated and honoured,? she said of the development proposal.

These were concerns also shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who has previously sat on HAC.

?I agree that the Sisman factory, which is now being used by Kerry's Place, is very important,? said Councillor Gaertner, referencing the primary tenant of the buildings, which have since been converted largely for office space.

Addressing the issues raised by Council, Town Planner David Waters said that although HAC scored the building higher, his department wanted to make sure that score ?was defensible at the end of the day.? Also playing a part in this decision was an additional heritage evaluation provided by the developer.

"We had these two competing opinions," said Mr. Waters. "Our intention was to make sure the HAC recommendation was solid, so we ended up peer reviewing [the assessment] from the applicant, which is why there was a delay in the implementation of the recommendation from HAC in terms of the score."

This did not sit well with Councillor Humfryes who said it is important that staff "go back and look at the policies and processes" when heritage is involved and these evaluations should be given due consideration.

"This Council is the only governing body that is allowed to change policy and that cannot be done by staff alone," she concluded. "We need to make sure we continue to be diligent in this and I do believe that this was missing; I really believe we need to make sure we're firm, that we're consistently using processes and policies that are in [place] today."

That being said, however, she said further work will get "an amazing plan going forward."

From Mayor Tom Mrakas' perspective, a future plan should include elements of Aurora's heritage.

"This building meets everything that is required to possibly be designated," he said. "I think ultimately what we need to look at and what the applicant needs to do is go back, sharpen their pencil and look at how we incorporate this building. I think when you take this building, try to refurbish it, bring it back to its original glory and maybe possibly use that as lofts surrounded by stacked townhomes. I think that is what would be appropriate for the area where we intensify."

"This is an area we want to intensify but it is about appropriate intensification. I propose we continue to hold strong on what makes us unique and have appropriate development in our community."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter