

Council questions Petch House's future after splitting with wedding chapel option

By Brock Weir

Could it be splitsville for Petch House and the Town of Aurora?

The relationship between one of Aurora's oldest buildings and the municipality hit a rough patch this week after Councillor Tom Mrakas' attempts to convert the historic building into a venue for civil marriages brought up more questions than answers.

This past February, Council approved a motion from Councillor Mrakas asking for a report on the feasibility of making Petch House, which currently stands behind the Aurora Seniors' Centre, into a possible venue for civil marriage ceremonies, which are currently being held in Council chambers.

According to the resulting report, which was presented at last week's General Committee meeting, it could cost in the neighbourhood of \$35,000 to bring the restored and reconstructed log cabin up to code with electrical facilities and an HVAC system for year-round use.

A full upgrade to allow further uses — including a new wood floor system, connection to municipal water and sewer systems, and the construction of two washrooms, among other items — could cost up to \$97,500.

With these numbers, however, Council members started a whole new discussion, a discussion which could lead to the building itself being moved from its current location, where it has stood since 2014.

Councillor John Abel, for instance, who sits on the Board of the Aurora Seniors' Association, said the Board has its reservations on converting Petch House into a wedding venue. Civil weddings are traditionally carried out by the Town on Fridays, one of the busiest days at the Seniors' Centre.

That being said, however, he said spending \$35,000 to bring the building up to code was "probably not a bad investment."

Councillor Mrakas had a similar view, stating that whatever the future use of Petch House, it is going to need electricity and an HVAC system.

"The longer we wait, the more it is going to cost, so we might as well put it in now and we can use it for something," he said. "[A wedding chapel] is not the only purpose it can be used for. Having the HVAC system and the electricity in there would allow staff to possibly have other types of events as well. This would be just the beginning of being able to use that space instead of [it] sitting there empty and useless."

But its future use might not be on that site at all.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she simply couldn't see Petch House being used as a wedding venue without a washroom.

"We have been trying to figure out the Petch House for years and nobody wanted it," she said. "Now the Seniors don't want it either. The thing this would be perfect for is additional use for the Seniors' Centre because it is just busting at the seams and we're not going to [build] another Seniors' Centre. Is it out of the question that we figure out how to connect the Seniors' Centre with the Petch House?"

Councillor Abel offered that the Seniors' Centre is in "dire need" of storage space and Petch House might be a solution.

"The idea was to abut it to the [Seniors' Centre] and create a door," he said. "It is not practical to go up and down the ramp [leading to the Petch House at the entrance to the Aurora Arboretum] if we are moving tables and chairs. We could just roll that up to part of the building. That is not a bad idea."

Another potential use, he said, was something previously suggested by local landscape architect David Tomlinson, namely to have it in the Aurora Wildlife Park as a blind.

"Looking back at some of the old reports, I know we had an open call to the public and there was a long list of ideas and suggestions about Petch House, but for the Wildlife Park, the Eco Park, and those were ideas that were talked about at the time but those facilities just weren't ready," added Councillor Michael Thompson. "We chose adjacent to the Seniors' Centre and maybe Library Square is an option. I would like to get that information before making a final determination next week."

A final determination on Petch House's fate — wedding chapel or otherwise — is not likely to come this week.

There is group therapy in the offing before the idea finally makes it to the altar, with the matter heading to the Heritage Advisory Committee for their review.