

Council to negotiate on funding the preservation of Hillary House

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, passed a motion to authorize Town staff to begin negotiating with the Aurora Historical Society on how best to preserve the historic Hillary House.

Built in 1862, Hillary House is celebrated as one of Canada's finest remaining examples of Gothic Revival architecture. Currently operating as a museum, it has long been a focal point of Aurora's heritage.

Until now, Hillary House has been maintained by a dedicated volunteer board, its membership, and community volunteers. However, the building has faced increasing challenges as it ages and the volunteer base supporting its maintenance continues to dwindle.

The Aurora Historical Society is now seeking the Town's assistance to explore options for the building's long-term sustainability.

A survey conducted to determine public opinion on the Town's involvement in the restoration found that respondents expressed strong support for the Town acquiring the property and funding the repairs. This project would cost an estimated \$2 million. The survey findings were presented in a report to Council and discussed at the December 2 meeting.

Overall, Council members expressed their interest in pursuing the conversation.

Some voiced concerns about the survey results, with Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson pointing out that 30 per cent of the respondents were non-Aurorans.

He asked Aurora's Community Services Director, Robin McDougall, whose team was involved in preparing the report, whether isolating the data to only Aurora residents would make a meaningful difference on the findings.

McDougall committed to looking into it.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland similarly shared an interest in isolating the data to Auroran respondents, noting, "When you're in our Town, and taxpayers here are paying for that, I think that could be a different weighted outcome. And who knows, I'm really interested in seeing what that looks like. I'm really interested in advancing these conversations, which is exactly what we are doing here tonight."

Finally, Mayor Tom Mrakas weighed in on the preservation efforts, emphasizing the need for a creative approach.

"When it comes to the preservation of the Hillary house, I think ultimately everyone wants to see that occur. But I think we do need to be creative in which way we're going to move forward with this to ensure that, not only is it preserved, but that it doesn't become a massive burden on the taxpayers."

Still, Mayor Mrakas expressed his optimism about the project, stating, "I'm looking forward to the discussions, and I'm looking forward to us coming up with creative solutions so we can have the Hillary House be there for many generations for people to cherish."

The next steps in the process will involve further negotiations and discussions between Town staff and the Aurora Historical Society, the outcomes of which will be presented in a report to Council in a future Closed Session meeting.

The community will be kept informed as the Town explores options for the future of this cherished historic landmark.

By Selena Loureiro