

Demo of Collis Leather shed highlights safety concerns



(Auroran photo by Peter Davey)

By Brock Weir

Changes could soon be underway on Aurora's Collis Leather property.

Council is set to approve the dismantling of a shed attached to the Tyler Street landmark this week which is in danger of collapse. The move, however, is seen as the first move in the overall redevelopment of the property.

While the owners have only applied to remove the roof of the shed, the report notes the entire shed building might be removed due to structural instability.

The structure has been identified as unsafe, as per a property standards order issued to the property owner on Wednesday, September 4, 2013, said Marco Ramunno, Director of Planning for the Town of Aurora, in a report. In order to comply with the property standards order, the owner must notify Council of the intent to demolish the structure, as per the requirements of the [Ontario Heritage act].

The report includes photos of a dilapidated three wall cinder block structure attached to a corner of the main Collis building.

Although the plans were approved by Committee last week, Councillors said surrounding neighbours were concerned over the environmental impacts of disturbing the property, such as water and soil contamination.

Being a tannery, it is quite a polluted property as it is, said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. I wanted to know before we approve proceeding with this, who or what process is going to be followed to make sure that there are no vats of contamination in the building or in the soil around the building. Before we demolish anything, is there going to be an expert watching this to make sure that none of the contamination goes into the water and the soil? There are a lot of questions that need to be asked before we say, Go ahead and demolish it.

Mr. Ramunno, however, said the new owners of the building which purchased the land in question from Maple Leaf Foods this summer are serious about moving the project forward and cleaning up the site.

The applicants will be proceeding with all the appropriate environmental assessments and cleanups in due course, said Mr. Ramunno. This is the first step in removing the building which is in poor structural condition.

The potential contaminants, however, dominated much of the discussion. Looking back over the history of the tannery, Councillor

Evelyn Buck said previous advice received from provincial inspectors is that whatever contaminants are now in the sediment of the nearby namesake Tannery Creek, it is best to leave things as they are.

“The best advice we have from provincial inspectors is don't mess with the sediment on the creek,” she said. “They are buried down there, leave them alone, and don't ever stir them up. You don't want any problems, leave the damn thing alone, and let them sleep easy.”

Nevertheless, neighbours are worried about them, according to Councillors Gaertner and Chris Ballard.

“They were concerned the entire building was going down and there might still be chemicals stored in the building that are quite nasty and they don't want to see spilled,” said Councillor Ballard on mistaken concerns from neighbours. “Anyone who has lived in Aurora for any length of time knows there are some great concerns with regards to it being a brownfield area.

“As the developer moves through applications and development moves ahead, I think it would be exceptionally wise for the Town to make sure that not only the local community and neighbourhood, but the entire community of Aurora is kept well apprised of what remediation is taking place, and what the plans are for the developer, what inspections will be in place?so everyone is comfortable, everything is above board, and the latest and best science is being deployed to make sure this will become an excellent development.”

No matter how things progress, Councillor Buck said she believed things on the site are better than they had been in the past when the tannery was in operation. That being said, she suggested the new owners might have bitten off more than they can chew.

“There is no way the owner is going to do anything less than is absolutely essential to make that site habitable,” she said. “If they're going to start doing something now, it will be done right. Councillors can be assured of that. The new owner might regret having bought it.”