

Demolition of homes in church development ?could set precedent?

By Brock Weir

The proposed demolition of five Victorian homes in the downtown core to make way for the new Aurora United Church and associated retirement residence calls into question the value Aurora places on heritage, contend area residents.

Members of the Aurora Village Ratepayers Association, which comprises of property owners along Temperance Street and surrounding areas, appealed to Council members to reject a recommendation from the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) to de-list the heritage homes, thus paving the way for the new church and retirement home complex.

Their appeals, however, are set to be formally rejected by Council this week after voting at the Committee level to uphold the HAC recommendations.

On April 10, HAC met to consider the status of 12, 5, 57 and 57A Temperance Street, as well as 16 Tyler Street, in the context of the new church and nine-storey Amica retirement home proposed for the land.

They recommended the undesignated properties be removed from Aurora's Register of Properties of Cultural Heritage Value or Interest after the properties fell short of the evaluation criteria required for preservation.

While HAC recommended ?residential-style architecture? be incorporated into the design of the Temperance Street façade and streetscape to give some indication of its previous appearance, this was not enough for the neighbours who said that if individual homeowners are expected to keep up their historic properties, large companies and the operators of large-scale build projects should be expected to do the same.

Highlighting a number of properties in the area that have been restored and repurposed ? including the Patrick House art gallery and Bijoy's Restaurant, David Cabianca said if these owners have been able to make it work through sheer effort and expense, large developers have the resources to preserve the five buildings in question ?to add contextual value? to its part of the community.

?We all know the expression of placing the cart before the horse,? he said. ?In this case, now that the community has had the opportunity to review the heritage impact assessment, I ask Council, one, to refuse the recommendation to delist the homes until completion of the requested professional peer review of the heritage impact assessment; and two, any decision to delist and subsequently demolish any of these homes resulting from the peer review has to be deferred until the matter of the official plan amendment and zoning bylaw amendment has been dealt with.

?If the decision to allow the development to proceed and remove these homes is made, Council has given a clear message that heritage preservation is not a priority.?

Neighbour Angela Daust offered a similar perspective.

?Ordinary citizens drove to preserve their homes and businesses in keeping with the Town's vision, spending their own money and personal time without grants from the Town or anybody else while a large corporation developing for profit can proceed and be allowed to demolish similar homes without regard to preservation,? she said. ?This will appear that Council is setting up two sets of rules and this is completely unfair.?

Coming into this debate, ratepayer Tony Masongsong had at least one thing in common with the Town of Aurora: both have received significant awards for their efforts in heritage preservation, his awards coming from his restoration of his Temperance Street home, and Aurora's, including the Prince of Wales Prize for Heritage Preservation, coming from larger scale projects.

?Because of these outstanding awards, I feel Council should reject the committee's recommendation to demolish these outstanding homes based on my example which proves that listed structures can be restored,? he said. ?Repair might be extensive but the end result is the preservation of Aurora's heritage value and streetscape.?

Although Council members took note of their concerns, they largely agreed nothing new was brought to the table to ultimately change their minds.

Councillor Jeff Thom, who serves as HAC's Vice-Chair said they appreciate that people come forward and want to preserve their historic homes, but the challenge arises when someone has a listed home and ?doesn't want to be a steward of the heritage.?

?Council then has to make a decision on designating that home and preserving it, sometimes against the will of the homeowner,? he said. Designating a house [requires meeting] a pretty high threshold. We don't own the house, it is a private entity that owns it. For me, I don't think that this house warrants designation and I couldn't vote to designate a house just because we want to maintain the streetscape. It has to have inherent cultural and historic value in and of itself.?

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: ?I have not heard anything contrary to make me think we should designate these properties. I have heard the comments from the residents on their desire to see it incorporated into future planning designs and preserve some of

the heritage aspects of it, and I think those are all valid comments and that is why we have the public planning process to be able to flesh those out and have conversations around what that site may look like. From my perspective the committee did its job and I support their recommendation.?