

Development of church lands need to pay attention to potential human remains: historians

By Brock Weir

The church building has been razed, and the brown earth filling the hole left by Aurora United Church is providing life to little bursts of green, but the future of the site will be very much in focus starting this week.

Councillors are due to consider a Notice of Motion from Councillor Evelyn Buck urging Council to work with the Church to rebuild something with a greater vision.

In her motion, Councillor Buck sites the long-pending decision on what to do with Library Square, the swath of land on Victoria Street currently home to the former Aurora Public Library building and the adjacent former home of the Aurora Seniors' Centre. She cites the church site at the foot of Yonge Street and Mosley as a project that dovetails in with this greater vision.

'Both are key sites within the historic core of the Town and both have important institutional functions within the community,' she said in her motion, asking Council to task Mayor Geoffrey Dawe with having a 'meeting between Councillors and Church representatives to discover how the Town and Aurora United Church might work together for renewal of the church and municipal functions, to the benefit of both.'

Although the motion was first put on the Council agenda last month, it was delayed due to time constraints. It comes back to the table as the Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) held off taking the church property off the list of registered historical sites pending further investigations on the land.

'Unfortunately, after the fire there is, of course, no more built heritage fabric on that property,' said Vanessa Hicks, Heritage Planner for the Town of Aurora, explaining her recommendation to delist the property. 'There is no physical cultural heritage value on that property with the church being burnt down.'

But, for many members of HAC, physical cultural heritage value can be more than what immediately meets the eye.

'Do you realise there might be some burial plots on the property, which adds to its historical significance?' asked HAC member Bob McRoberts. 'It was a cemetery before they moved a bunch of bodies down to [Aurora Cemetery] in the late 1960s.'

For historian, and fellow HAC member John McIntyre, it was reminiscent of the situation Trinity Anglican Church found itself in when burials left over after many of the burials were reinterred at Aurora Cemetery, were subsequently rediscovered.

'If there is reason to believe there are archaeological remains on site, I would ask they do an archaeological report to make sure there are no remains,' replied Ms. Hicks to the Committee.

That is what HAC ultimately decided to do, with member David Heard also suggesting the Committee look into creating a 'greater visual presence' on the now vacant site, explaining the history of what stood proudly on the site until the April 11 fire.