

Distinct ideas emerge as second Heritage District prepares for next phase

By Brock Weir

Homeowners in Yonge and Wellington's southeast quadrant could come one step closer this month to living in a Heritage Conservation District.

Carl Bray, a heritage planner retained by the Town of Aurora to undertake an extensive study in the area, says he hopes to have a report before Council by the end of this month, the next step in going forward with a final plan to make Aurora's second heritage district as reality.

This first phase in the plan has included a series of meetings, both with stakeholders and the public at large, on the nature of a heritage district. Distinct guidelines handed down by the Province provide a framework on whether certain areas would qualify for this special status.

?Here, you have the Yonge Street commercial strip on the west, Wellington Street and the Northeast Aurora District on the north, the rail corridor on the east and to the south you have the change in topography as you go down the slope to the creek at Rotary Park,? says Mr. Bray. ?These are boundaries which you can visibly tell, but there are also, of course, historical and legislative boundaries.

?There a number of different layers of criteria that would give you a boundary. The area needs to have some historical distinction. In this case, it is one of the first neighbourhoods of Aurora. It was really developed as a result of the railway and it was subdivided almost immediately after the railway arrived and filled in gradually over the years.?

The second burst of activity in this area occurred when companies like Collis Leather began setting up shop in the early part of the 20th century and suddenly there was a need for more homes for workers in the factories.

Additional things that separate this area from other neighbourhoods in Aurora, he adds, are the presence of local ?institutions? such as Town Park, the old Aurora Armoury, as well as the former Church Street School and Wells Street Public School, churches, and community halls.

While Mr. Bray says his phone has not exactly been ?ringing off the hook? in regards to the potential of this becoming Aurora's second Heritage District, public meetings have conjured up varying opinions from residents. There has been general support, he says, although a ?significant minority? have opposed the idea of designation in the belief it would ?restrict the freedom of what they could do with their properties.?

?This is a fairly standard complaint in the early stages of any heritage conservation district study,? says Mr. Bray. ?What was a little unusual in this case is several of the people who have owned property in this area for a long time were unaware there had even been a consideration of this area as a heritage conservation district. [It has been on the table] for nine years and counting.?

According to Councillor John Abel, chair of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee, another curious trend that has emerged through these meetings is a sense of the different nature between this proposed heritage district, versus Aurora's first on the north side of Wellington. Whereas the northern heritage district is defined by its architecture, residents on the south side appear to be more interested in a heritage conservation district based around those previously mentioned ?institutions.?

?This is less on the architecture and a greater emphasis is leaning towards the atmosphere of the community itself,? says Councillor Abel. ?I think it lends very well for our community. It is very unique and has a great history. It centres around Town Park and it always has. It was a working man's neighbourhood as opposed to the bigger homes right on Wellington.

?We characterise this as a sandwich between the train and all its activities and the Town and all its activities. You had Sisman's

Shoes and everyone knew everyone. You could hear the milk wagon coming down and everybody knew what was going on. It was a very well-planned community and really unique.?

Mr. Bray says he agrees with this assessment in that aside from the houses directly on Wellington Street, the larger merchants' homes on Victoria Street, the two schools and churches, things are comparatively modest in the southern quadrant.

?It's more of a working class area and it really shines in terms of some of the interesting streetscapes and some of the vistas and the fact it is centred around the park,? says Mr. Bray. ?The northeast is a little bit isolated from the downtown commercial area, a little bit isolated from the transition proper, so it has a different feel to it in terms of its history, its look and its culture.?