

District's future lies in public planning meeting

By Brock Weir

Whether for it or against it, Aurora residents will have a further opportunity to speak out on the proposed Southeast Aurora Heritage District next month at a public planning meeting.

Councillors were due to advance to the second phase of the Heritage Conservation District (HCD) study at the Committee level last week, but these plans were nixed after residents took to the podium unanimous in their arguments against the plan.

A second phase will codify the fine details of the HCD, including finalized boundary lines, which are currently in flux, along with details of just what will and will not be permitted to be done with properties within the district, should it gain final approval.

Councillors delayed making a final decision to move onto Phase 2, pending further public input after delegations raised more questions than there were answers.

Looking within the report before Councillors last week, Councillor Michael Thompson underscored the view contained in it that a successful HCD is one where all property owners "understand and agree" with the plan's goals and intents.

"I don't see a majority of the property owners agreeing with what is before us," said Councillor Thompson. "What this needs, before anything else, is more community consultation if we're going to move forward with the second phase. Some consideration needs to be given to expanding how we get the information out to residents and the manner in which we have done it."

Previous efforts, as it related to the existing HCD in the northeast quadrant of Yonge and Wellington were "exhaustive", he said and response has been significantly more cohesive.

"There might be some misinformation out there and this is an opportunity correct some of it, but those issues need to be addressed. The only way to do it is through a much more elaborate community consultation process as was done in the past because obviously it seemed to work well. The majority of residents within that district were supportive."

Further public consultation and engagement was also supported by such councillors as John Gallo and Wendy Gaertner, who questioned how they could "reconcile" moving ahead to the next steps of spending money on further background study when residents appeared to be vehemently opposed to the plan.

For Councillor Evelyn Buck, however, the community was anything but disengaged from the process. They were there in the audience, they were vocal, and they knew where they stood.

"The community is fully engaged in this question," she argued. "They are completely engaged in the question of whether the HCD is acceptable. They have come here with solid arguments on why it isn't and they have been greeted by comments that [with] more communication you will understand better, so we'll take care of your concerns. These people have done their research. They have looked into every aspect of the impact on their properties and they want no part of it."

At this point, audience members applauded Councillor Buck, who added the idea for a HCD was the brainchild of a particular property owner concerned "monster homes" could start dotting the southeast landscape if a plan was not put in place.

"There are properties that maybe aren't too wide, but certainly have the depth that would lend itself to redevelopment in the modern age. Certainly the marketplace for those properties would reflect the potential for that redevelopment. Certainly when people bought these properties, they paid a price for that potential and they have been paying for it ever since. [Property owners] have every right to have their houses designated. I don't believe they have the right to impose their desires on everybody else in the neighbourhood."

As Chair of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee, Councillor John Abel has been a vocal proponent of the HCD, but said given

last week's delegations he was reluctant to move forward until all these concerns could be addressed. He stressed, however, that HCD plans are only at the beginning and future talks will determine where final boundaries lie, who wants to be a part of it and what will or will not work.

?We're not saying we're going to impose this on you,? he said. ?We're basically saying we're going to invite you into this proposal. What I saw four years ago indicated the whole area was for it, but a lot has happened since then. [Maybe after further talks] we can get a feeling of where this goes and how we can get it resolved.?