

Family given green light to rebuild home following Council decision



A local family, the Panets, have been given the green light to rebuild their home in Aurora's Heritage Conservation District (HCD), following a decision of Council last week.

Local lawmakers unanimously approved a heritage permit application on March 28, which will allow the family to demolish the existing home on 60 Fleury Street, which was heavily damaged by fire in January of 2022, and rebuild in an Edwardian style that is in keeping with the HCD.

In recent weeks, the application has been subject to heated debate among Council members both at the table and on social media with some elected officials initially voting at the start of the month to send the matter back to the Town's re-constituted Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) for input.

Others, however, stated that as the HAC hasn't yet convened its first meeting of the 2022-2026 term, priority should be given to allowing the family to get back into their neighbourhood as soon as possible.

Following delegations from both sides of the coin last week and an audience in Council chambers bearing signs of support for the Panet family, Council paved the way for a rebuild on a 7 ? 0 vote.

?Meaningful dialogue is very important for a quality community,? said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who represents the ward in which Fleury Street sits. ?Individual interests matter and heritage issues and preservation of our built environment has been a declared priority in this community for years. Concerns over infills and stable neighbourhoods remain, not just in this instance but all over Aurora and will continue and processes must be respected and stay in place.?

Weese, who initially voted at GC to send the matter to HAC, said the Committee is a ?resource? for the Town but ?in the absence of HAC, Council is required to investigate issues such as these. The ?logistics? of referring it back to HAC would, he agreed, be ?prohibitive.?

?My advice on this motion is the demolition of this heritage property, while being an unfortunate loss to the community, is appropriate from an engineering, from an environmental, and from a family point of view,? he said. ?After my work on this file, the referral to the HAC, while prudent to gather expert advice, is not necessary for me. I have done the investigation of the issue to my own satisfaction and I will vote tonight on that.?

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, who is set to serve on HAC, said he was still 'perplexed' on the timing and why a meeting this week or the week after would not be possible.

Although staff said it would be possible for the Committee Chair to call a meeting, they reiterated that the proposal before Council conformed with the HCD plan.

'This rendering, subject to the Heritage Permit, in our opinion, conforms to the HCD plan, specifically and especially in the form of the scale, the architectural design, and the protection of the Fleury streetscape,' said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning. 'We're very confident the plan before Council conforms with the HCD plan.'

In making his decision, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said he always tries to 'weigh the facts with the opinions of the residents and my own thoughts on the matter.' The staff report, he said, stated the proposed new home conforms with the HCD, the demolition was warranted, and proper steps were followed.

'This isn't so much just about bricks and mortar, it's about an Aurora family, getting those residents back in their home,' he said. 'We heard the last time about the turmoil they've gone through dealing with this, the impact to their family, their kids' lives. I think it is unreasonable to delay it any longer than that and that we need to make that decision tonight.'

A similar view was offered by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said in the 'best of all possible words' there would be time enough to go to HAC, but agreed that Council should make a decision on it that evening.

That being said, however, she said she still had concerns over the 'colour' of the house fitting in with the neighbourhood and that it would 'stand out like a sore thumb.'

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland shared in the 'disappointment' that HAC was not in place and ready to tackle the matter, she said she appreciated the work carried out by Councillor Weese in listening to residents' concerns.

'Going back and forth, this is how a community works together in these circumstances,' she said. 'I am a believer in true leadership that is measured by the success of others around you and to lead by example, by establishing strong, collaborative relationships to ensure the success of the team and the community as a whole. What I can say is I did feel a team effort by those behind the scenes and I am really grateful to everybody for doing that.'

'I would like to take this as a learning opportunity for improvements so this doesn't happen again. Perhaps in a motion through New Business or later on in the next month or cycle that they maybe need to continue on'. a new body that is elected and that way this doesn't happen again.'

Added Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim: 'Even as we respect the need for policies and procedures, in time of special circumstances, and I believe this is one of them, we need to place common sense and prudence ahead of policy and bureaucracy. It's clear that by looking at the design that it does fit in with other homes in the neighbourhood. In the end, I believe homes are made to live in and not to look at. With this house, it is certainly nice to look at as well.'

The last word went to Mayor Tom Mrakas who underscored how the proposed build fit in with the HCD.

'If I have expert staff saying it conforms and it meets all those guidelines within the Heritage District, then to me it makes no sense to delay an Aurora family, not even one second,' he said. 'We are the body that needs to be making decisions on behalf of the residents of this community. That's what we were elected to do and that's what we should be doing.'

By Brock Weir
Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter