

Former college, Monk's Walk should be preserved for future generations: Committee

By Brock Weir

The brown brick building on the northwest corner of Yonge Street and Bloomington Road has seen a lot of uses over the last century, from a seminary school, to a mental asylum, to a provincial government building. But, as the Provincial Government moves to divest itself of the expansive property, its next chapter should begin as a preserved piece of Aurora's history.

So says the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC), which voted last week to recommend to Council it formally designate the former De La Salle College, subsequently the Pine Ridge Institute, under the Ontario Heritage Act.

If passed by Council, designation would include the former De La Salle College building itself, the Monk's Walk, a walking trail used for meditation by the monks who used to call the College home, and the unique Yonge-facing courtyard and street frontage, while much of the rest of the property would be open to residential development.

An Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) station also on site would not be impacted.

Designation has been in the works since December of 2016 when Infrastructure Ontario submitted an Official Plan (OP) amendment which would re-designate the land to allow for cluster residential uses.

Three concepts for possible development were submitted at the time. The first two concepts retain the College building, the first transforming the complex into an apartment with 47 detached homes built in behind it. The second concept also retains the building as an apartment, but the Yonge Street frontage is lost to accommodate a townhouse complex to the east and west of the buildings, with further detached homes along the western perimeter. The third eliminates the college in favour of an extensive housing development with townhouses at the core, surrounded by stacked townhouses and detached homes.

The following spring, Council directed the HAC to evaluate the heritage attributes of the property before it went further.

"[The College property] contains a rich history over the past 200 years," wrote Adam Robb, Planner for the Town of Aurora, in his report to the HAC. "The lands were originally settled by Joseph Minthorn in 1808. Another notable early settler includes William Mair, who held the land until 1878. In 1914, the property was purchased by the Christian Brotherhood. By 1916, the Brotherhood completed a school known as De La Salle College, for young men destined to pursue religious services. During this time, the Brotherhood established a walking trail at the north end of the property known locally as Monk's Walk. This trail comprises of religious carvings in trees along the route, used by the Brotherhood for meditation. The Brotherhood would continue to operate the school until 1949, where at that time the school was moved back to Toronto.

"The property was purchased by the Government of Ontario in 1950. The building was converted into a residential facility operated by the Ministry of Health. The building would house over 300 men and boys suffering from mental illnesses, developmental delay or physical disability. The facility was re-named 'Pine Ridge' in 1974 and would continue to operate until 1984."

Over the last several years, patients of the former Pine Ridge facility have been involved in a class action lawsuit against the Province.

Over the last 30 years, the Government of Ontario has used the building in a number of ways, including a facility for the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ontario Registry Office, and for the Ministry of Transportation.

"The former De La Salle College building, front garden and Monk's Walk are historically linked to its surroundings," continued Mr. Robb. "The building itself is considered a landmark both immediately in the context of the Yonge and Bloomington intersection and at a municipal-wide context given its historic connections to the community. In staff's opinion, the main building is important in defining the character of the Yonge and Bloomington crossroads given its historic and present use as a public use building."

The report went further to request that any future development of the area preserve public access to the Monk's Walk trail.

Members of the HAC agreed when they convened last Wednesday for their last meeting of the 2014-2018 Council term.

Among their primary concerns were the preservation of Monk's Walk as well as the visual link to Yonge Street.

"To me, [the forecourt] sounds more like an associated heritage feature more than anything else," said Councillor Jeff Thom. "If we want to buttress what is written in the [Official Plan] and really reiterate that we want that piece of land protected as part of this designation? I think we have to be fairly descriptive and thorough in our recommendations to Council. If it is important to this Committee that we keep [the frontage] I would suggest that it be included very simply to the recommendation to Council."

HAC agreed and Mr. Robb noted that any further proposals received regarding the property would be "entirely subject to [the Town's] review, regardless of how beefed up it is or not."