

Future of Howard Johnson's site is a question to which Council wants answers

By Brock Weir

A new hotel to serve the needs of visitors to Aurora is an issue that has been championed for over a decade by politicians, business leaders and the community at large.

These voices were only heightened when Howard Johnson's, Aurora's only hotel, shut down over one year ago and now local lawmakers want action on the site which is still held by landowners who have, say the Town, been hard to pin down.

Last month, Council requested municipal staff look into how Aurora's existing property standards bylaws relate to the former hotel site. A report before Council last week from Techa van Leeuwen, Director of Bylaw Services, said her department has been involved with the property since February 2014 after complaints from area residents, complaints which continue to trickle in.

Bylaw services received a complaint from a patron that the hotel was in disrepair and building systems were not functioning properly, said Ms. van Leeuwen, noting inspections were made at the time and an Order to Comply was issued. Prior to the expiration of the property standards order, the hotel went out of business and the building was vacated. The deficiencies of the order do not apply to a vacant building. Bylaw Services has attended the site on several occasions over the past year. It has been confirmed the building is secure and utilities have been disconnected. The property owner has retained an individual to oversee the maintenance of the building including weekly site visits, interior building walk-throughs and cutting grass.

We have been attending the property approximately once every two weeks, added Ms. van Leeuwen, responding to questions from Councillor Michael Thompson on a variety of complaints and rumours he has received on the building. We did recently attend the property as we had received some concerns with equipment and auto repairs as well. [The maintenance man] was securing the underground garage. It could have just been construction equipment, small machinery, or those types of repairs.

While the memo notes there have been reports of breaking and entering on the site, reports which have been addressed by York Regional Police, who are continually monitoring the area for suspicious activity, Councillors were glad to hear the building was secure.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, however, questioned whether these standards could be in place indefinitely. As long as the building doesn't fall into disrepair to the point where it would require a demolition it can remain status quo, said Ms. Van Leeuwen.

That was not enough for the Councillor, who pressed for more detail on just what the property owner intends to do with the building. The answer was a simple one: it's a matter of playing the waiting game.

We have been attempting to try and meet with the owners but as of yet we have not been successful, said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning. We have been attempting to contact the owner and sit down with him just to understand what, if any, plans he has with it. As long as it is safe and secure, I am not sure how long it is going to continue to stay vacant.

Attempts have also been made by the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA), added Mayor Geoff Dawe, who serves as Chair of the organization.

The Conservation Authority has been trying to track down the owner with some issue they have been dealing with [regarding] this piece of property and they are having a difficult time in tracking [them down], said Mayor Dawe. The Conservation Authority has certainly been working diligently to track these folks down and get some of those issues cleared up.

When The Auroran spoke to the owners of the property last year, issues with the LSRCA included objection to fill used by the property owner to repair the hotel's rear parking lot, which abuts Tannery Creek.