

George Street School demo approved, but public consultation will determine land's future

Council has given the green light to demolishing the former George Street School building.

Local lawmakers voted 6 ? 0 to begin the demolition process with the opposition vote coming from Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

The vote came following a delegation from area resident Tom Hashem who suggested that the former school's gymnasium, which was a more recent addition to the venerable school building, be spared the wrecking ball for future public use.

Lawmakers were interested in tentatively exploring the idea, but, with the Town's stated intention of using the lion's share of the property for parkland while using the street-front site of the school to build homes in order to help the Town recoup the cost of the land purchase, Town Staff said the gym would take up a considerable footprint.

?I don't know if I am interested in delaying this process because I would like it to move forward as quickly as it can. I'm sympathetic to the idea, I feel it is a good idea, I just don't feel we have had enough time to explore it,? said Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo. ?The only way we can [explore the gym idea] is to not move forward with what is before us.?

Time was also of the essence for Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said proceeding with demolition ahead of a Public Planning process on how the George Street site of the property should be redeveloped was ?putting the cart before the horse.?

?Everything here is predicated on us changing the zoning and using this for development,? she said, suggesting Council simply receive the report and pursue the consultation. ?I am very concerned with the way this is stated. I don't believe we have gone out to the public and gotten enough input from them because it is a very important decision for that neighbourhood and the Town.?

Delaying the demolition process failed to gain traction around the table, but Council members underscored the importance of the Public Planning process moving forward.

?I think the demolition needs to happen sooner rather than later and ultimately just because we demolish it, doesn't mean we're going to be building residential lots. We're still going to have to go through the public process,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas. ?To me, the building needs to be removed no matter what we do, whether we decide it to be extra parkland, whether we decide it to be residential, whether we decide to build another community centre there ? the building needs to be removed.?

While the formal public consultation hasn't yet begun, both Mayor Mrakas and Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, in whose ward the property sits, said they have been engaging with residents on what they would like to see unfold.

?I know we had closed session about this and have to be mindful about the things we chat about,? said Councillor Gilliland. ?However, for me, I was under the impression that what is being presented today is, we felt, in recommendation from staff, the best course of action going forward was to go through this demolition and to put a delay on this would be counterintuitive to the conversations I felt we had within that meeting to come to this conclusion. Having said that? the recommendation from staff and the state of the school facility and the opportunity we have before us? I have personally no interest in [delaying] this further and would like to move this forward. The residents I have spoken to within the immediate area and beyond want to see this move forward and not be delayed any further as well.

?I am very confident the decision we have before us today?leaves us a good path for opportunity.?

Some of those opportunities will be determined through the public planning process, particularly the size and type of housing, should that be the path that is ultimately taken by Council.

?I have talked to a few of the residents in the area about the value of keeping the form and function of the types of housing in the area and I agree with them completely,? said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese. ?I am looking forward to this rezoning and [whether it is five residential lots or seven] that will all be resolved to the satisfaction of residents.?

The Town of Aurora purchased the former public school this past April for \$10.72 million, funded from reserves, with the goal of building a neighbourhood park of between four and 10 acres, allowing for multi-use courts, playgrounds and other amenities, with the balance of the site to be sold to recoup some of the purchase price.

By Brock Weir