

Heritage demolition raises Council questions

By Brock Weir

The demolition of a heritage building in northeast Aurora before it was de-listed has raised the ire of Council and heritage advocates.

Council members are calling for harsher penalties for such demolitions without a permit after a building on the southeast corner of St. John's Sideroad and Leslie Street met the wrecking ball before Council had the opportunity to sign off.

Going into last week's General Committee meeting, Council was facing a staff recommendation agreeing to the building at 1625-1675 St. John's Sideroad be removed from the Town's register of properties of Cultural Heritage Value or Interest, thus paving the way for its demolition.

The recommendation also called for, as part of the future Draft Plan of Subdivision of the area, that the property be remembered in various ways, including street names, and the salvaging of foundation stones to be incorporated into a heritage marker.

The property in question, according to a report from Municipal Planner Adam Robb, is considered a "worker house estate" with a two-storey brick residence dating from the 1960s, along with an equestrian complex from the same era. The property also held a 19th century barn, a one-storey mid-century cottage, and a further residence dating from after 1927.

A Cultural Heritage Assessment and Heritage Working Group evaluation found that the property as a whole did not meet Provincial standards for heritage preservation, nor did any of the individual buildings on site, but staff recommended a heritage plaque be installed.

According to the Heritage Impact Assessment on the property, the land in question was first granted to King's College in 1828. The original grant covered 200 acres but by 1847, the eastern half of the property was sold to a John Wilson, with the second half sold in 1862 to Thomas Coates.

"Coates was a Quaker farmer born in 1815, according to the 1961 Canada West Census," reads the assessment. "The census indicates that Coates and his wife Lydia were living in a one-storey frame house with their seven children. Coates held the subject property well into the late 19th century. In 1892, Coates sold his undivided interest in the 100 acres of the west half of the lot to his son Benjamin."

Later that year, Benjamin Coates sold the western half of the lot to James Hill and it changed hands many times over the subsequent years. In 1927, the Finney family sold most of the property to the Sifton

Family, who flipped it to an investment company, which held it for over two decades before being acquired by Carolyn A. Sifton.

In subsequent decades, under a further new owner, the land became known for its equestrian activities under the name Hill N' Dale.

The lands are slated to redevelopment as part of Aurora's 2C Plan and the property owners submitted a demolition permit earlier this year. Under regulations, the Town had 60 days for the application to move through the system, including review from the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee and, finally, Council.

But property owners beat Council to the punch.

“The dwelling is no longer there with the barn ? it was removed within the 40th day of the 60-day period in which the demolition permit had been applied for,” said David Waters, Aurora's new Director of Planning, following questions from Councillor John Gallo, who asked for the matter to be looked into. “We will be adding a surcharge to their demolition permit to cover the dwelling removal prematurely.

“I believe that staff did support the delisting and there were some conditions regarding its removal. For instance, saving some of the stonework for a plaque, and recognizing its equestrian heritage through the street naming?those are conditions the Committee did support based on staff's recommendations, but they also said the owner of the property prematurely demolished the barn within the 60 day period.”

This was not good enough for Councillor Gallo.

“But it is still a listed property; Council has never delisted the property,” said the Councillor. “The property that was listed was demolished and all they're going to get is a fine. That's pretty sad.”

Mayor Tom Mrakas said he didn't disagree with Councillor Gallo's assessment, saying it was “very disappointing.” He went on to question whether there was anything else the Town could do in this case.

Whole Town Solicitor Patricia De Sario said she would have to look into the matter further, she said a heftier fine could be levied under the Ontario Heritage Act.

“This is concerning for all of us here,” Mayor Mrakas concluded. “I think we all value our heritage and it is something we need to ensure so that people don't jump the gun and take matters into their own hands. We've seen many times demolition by decay, we see it time and time again. It is something we need to discourage and make sure there are proper fines in place that allow us to discourage this from happening.”

Added Councillor Rachel Gilliland: “We need to have a

policy in place to make it not encouragable for someone to just pay this fine and move on. It is not something we should take lightly [and] we need to look at the monetary consequences of that.?