

Heritage Park plan on ice for up to 90 days in hunt for private partnerships

By Brock Weir

In recent weeks, the focus of an extensive 'heritage park' on Yonge Street has shifted from a municipal project to securing private sector partners. Now, Council has set a window of 90 days to see if these opportunities actually exist.

Councillors last week voted to delay any further negotiations on the purchase of three heritage properties on Yonge Street for 90 days to gauge the business community, as well as wider potential private sector partners to see if there is any interest on their part to get a piece of the action.

According to Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, cursory calls by himself and Aurora CAO Neil Garbe have given a positive indication there is interest out there.

'We chatted with some people in development and some people on the Ontario Heritage Trust to gauge where we might take this with respect to private sector and other body interest,' said Mayor Dawe. 'There was indeed some interest from the private sector and the Ontario Heritage Trust to see if we might move forward with the discussions.'

Councillors voted 5-4 in favour of delaying things by 90 days. For proponents, it was a vital move to ensure there are partners there to avoid the risk of going it alone, while others said they were concerned about what could happen to the three properties in question within those 90 days.

'By moving alone, we are missing out on some of the biggest opportunities,' said Councillor Paul Pirri.

For Councillor Michael Thompson, making these calls to potential investors is all about doing the Town's 'due diligence' in exploring all options to protect the property and make sure the project is viable.

'The idea of creating something that would draw residents and visitors to the downtown core to help preserve and promote our heritage, as well as serve as an additional catalyst to the revitalization of the downtown, those are all worthy pursuits and I am appreciative of the group bringing forth the idea,' he said. 'There must be an equitable way to pay for this and it cannot just be the Town of Aurora. There are enough stakeholders out there that there is the possibility we can help facilitate this.'

Councillor Thompson added he did not necessarily agree the Town needed to purchase the three properties in question at all, but said no stone can be left unturned. Councillors went into last week's Council meeting poised to vote on an 18-month plan to make the municipal acquisition of the three homes a reality, but he argued that was too long a process for such a transaction.

'We need to be in the best possible position to leverage this opportunity,' he said. 'We can only do that by doing our due diligence. [This] will accelerate the process if this Council decides it is a worthy thing to pursue.'

Although Councillor John Abel said he was supportive of going forward with purchasing the properties for a project, he said the word 'park' should be taken off the 'Hillary McIntyre Park' moniker. For him, it was a redevelopment, but while he wanted to go ahead with the purchase, he said a delay would give them a greater chance of coming up with a solid plan for the property.

'Let's find some stakeholders and we can make an informed decision,' he said.

Speaking in favour of the 90-day delay, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said it was probably a fairer process 'than an 18-month one-way agreement.'

'It will not get us the business plan that we are looking for, but it will get us closer to where we wish to be, which is, can we make this sustainable and will not cost the taxpayers. I think that is what we really want to know and what this will do for us. I think we owe it to be as clear as possible with how we work with the public. My concern with respect to urgency is that we protect our

heritage and we protect it in a reasonable timeframe. We do that properly and we have to do that in the most fiscally prudent method possible.?

While Councillors appeared to be all on the same page in choosing the most 'fiscally prudent' option for taxpayers, there was some disagreement in how to go about that. Councillor Sandra Humfryes, for instance, said while the delay had its merits, she was concerned it didn't provide any security for the properties in that 90 day window.

'I was hoping we would help with the buyer's perspective, and I am hoping that a 90 day deferral will allow staff the time to do what they need to do to better position us in making a decision and follow through with that ask,' she said. 'We need to know if [the property owners] will wait 90 days.?'

Councillor John Gallo said the previous 18 month plan contained the word 'negotiate?', and that provided a greater degree of comfort for him.

The motion on the floor doesn't hold the properties,' he said. 'My preference is to continue taking some time digesting this and allowing staff to do some more work [and send the message] don't go and sell your home just yet.?'

Added Councillor Ballard: 'I am concerned that if we defer for 90 days in search of partners and government funding, will we get the model we want, or will we potentially have a proposal before us that doesn't ultimately meet the test? Perhaps at that point we will move forward with the proper planning to ensure sustainability.?'