

Heritage Park plan put on hold until February

By Brock Weir

Proponents of a \$10 million proposal to make a heritage park a reality will have at least another couple of weeks to see if their vision will take one step closer to becoming a reality.

Councillors voted at last week's General Committee meeting to receive an extensive report outlining the potential viability of such a site, which would combine three Yonge Street properties into a four acre heritage park. Going into Tuesday's meeting, Councillors were faced with a recommendation to review the plan and to consider negotiating the sale of Hillary House, Readman House immediately to its south, and the yellow-hued Horton Place at the south corner of the block.

Had the recommendation passed as-is, Council could have formally authorised the negotiations to commence as soon as the first half of February.

For some members of Council, however, what was on the table was too much too soon.

'While I have been supportive of the concept from the get go, and I still am, I believe our Council recommendation was for a feasibility study and I think this goes way beyond a feasibility study,' said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. 'I think that having a presentation would be a good thing for us to have so I have a much better sense of what I am looking at here.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson who said he was not comfortable with the recommendation heading to February 4 as it was.

'I believe this is putting the cart before the horse,' said Councillor Thompson. 'Council neither endorsed this concept in principle nor had much opportunity to speak as a collective group and yet here we are already talking about negotiating the terms of agreement.'

'I would rather see this go forward and simply say. 'Council provide direction.' I just think it is too soon for the recommendation as is. Let's debate the merits of it itself and digest the report or have a presentation. I don't think it is fair to put forward that recommendation as it stands without prior direction to Council other than a feasibility study.'

Further recommendations included an additional report coming back to Council with the details of developing a master plan for the properties, a blueprint for the property's 'long term development and operation', and, of course, the results of the negotiation process.

Aurora Council authorised \$25,000 to retain consultants to develop a feasibility study for Hillary-McIntyre Park last June. What they received last week, however, went beyond that initial concept to a 94 page cost-benefit study.

'The report does not undertake a feasibility analysis of one particular vision for the site, but is intended to answer the primary questions of whether the purchase of the [properties] represents a long-term opportunity for the Town,' said consultants in their report. 'Based on our analysis, the report concludes that the opportunities are likely to outweigh the costs. This conclusion, however, is based on the principle the Town's interests are best served by the adaptive re-use of the combined site, guided by a master plan.'

Proponents of the project put forward an initial vision of Hillary House remaining as is, Horton Place remaining in a very similar state and opened as a museum and potential meeting space with the central Readman property getting a complete overhaul, including an extensive addition to accommodate permanent museum and office space as well as a potential banqueting facility or conference centre.

The report as received by Council, however, presents a very different picture 'a picture painted with a degree of urgency.

'At best, a potential scenario for the future of these properties is the continual upkeep of Horton Place in private ownership and the

ongoing operation, maintenance and capital investment as necessary, in Hillary House," reads the report. "However, this would come at a cost of losing the synergy and revenue generation potential associated with a consolidated site and the development of a private sector-led cultural and commercial hub at the site.

"At worst, the heritage asset value of Horton Place could be diminished with new ownership over time, and financial constraints may limit the longevity of Hillary House as a well-maintained local and national historic site."

It also explores partnership opportunities with private and non-profit groups, whereas the original vision was to bring the properties together with Federal and Provincial Grants, as well as a substantial infusion from Aurora's Hydro Reserves with an eye of creating a wholly municipal entity.

One option would orbit around a central museum, but include commercial development on-site while "maintaining the heritage character" of the property, as well as a "wellness" opportunity such as offices or a retirement facility.

"Development cannot rest on the shoulders of the municipality " there must be clear opportunities for the private sector to provide a means to generate revenues to the Town as owner of the land and property assets," notes the report, adding its uses shouldn't compete with other facilities in Aurora's portfolio.