

Hillary-McIntyre heritage park plan nixed by Council



By Brock Weir

Dreams to turn Hillary House, and the three properties immediately to its south, into a four-acre heritage park could turn to dust this week as Council faces a recommendation to put a halt to the project.

Staff recommend not proceeding with the purchase of the privately owned Horton Place and Readman House properties which would have ultimately lead to the three houses coming together under the auspices of the Town.

The vision, which was brought forward to Council two years ago by Bill Albino, and other members of the Hillary-McIntyre Park Founding Committee, was to bring the three properties under one entity which would ultimately come under the ownership of the Town of Aurora.

A significant portion of the \$10 million plan would have come out of Aurora's \$34 million Hydro Reserve funds, with the balance coming from Federal and Provincial grants, as well as private fundraising efforts.

What was initially floated as a four-acre heritage site with Hillary House remaining as is, the southernmost Horton Place becoming a museum, and the central Readman House gutted and transformed into a museum and conference space, has taken many twists and turns since its inception.

Most recently, a feasibility study suggested turning it into a commercial venture, with the possibility of a medical/health hub, but a report before Councillors this week from Aurora CAO Neil Garbe says as time wore on the possibility of coming up with a cohesive vision amongst all parties continued to diminish.

The study concludes that the purchase of Horton Place and Readman House represents a strategic purchase with long-term benefits to the Town likely to significantly outweigh the costs, says Mr. Garbe in his report. This conclusion, however, is based on the principle that the Town's best interests are served by adaptive re-use of the combined site, guided by a master plan. The assumption is that a feasible redevelopment should include investment by the private sector, as well as retaining public use for the site. Achieving development which does not burden the Town with significant capital costs, or operating deficit for the site, will require partnership with the private sector, as well as compromise to achieve the promise of the heritage park.

It was a departure, he noted from the original vision put forward by Mr. Albino and the other members of the committee, but another hitch in the plan was defining the ultimate role of the municipality in the finished result.

Staff examined the opportunities for creating commercial value on the properties with the view to, firstly, identify if profit could be generated to feed back into Hillary House and, secondly, identify what, if any, role the municipality should be taking, he said.

Town Staff contacted four private development firms who specialize in various types of land development with one firm having specialized involvement in heritage properties. With their assistance, staff were able to review basic concepts for development together with a review of relative profitability of each concept.

None of these developers, however, were willing to step up and partner with Aurora on adaptive re-use of the lands or, ultimately, the creation of a heritage park. But, if Council ultimately decides to abandon the plan as recommended this week, they still encourage the two remaining property owners – Aurora Historical Society President John McIntyre for Horton Place, and real estate broker Bruce Spragg for Readman House – to go forward and seek development firms [specializing] in adaptive re-use of heritage sites to purchase the two properties.

Adaptive re-use of the central Readman House, however, is unlikely as a plan for town-homes on the site of the demolished building has been in place for the better part of a decade.

Through discussions with such firms, it became apparent that any adaptive re-use on the site would most likely require the demolition of Readman House, notes Mr. Garbe. The space would be required for parking or additional commercial activity. The option of purchasing Horton Place and Readman House and converting Horton Place to professional office was examined but not enough revenue could be generated to pay for the acquisition and development costs.

Despite this, Mr. Garbe notes that staff are confident policies already in place via Aurora's Official Plan, Promenade Plan, and other pieces of legislation will give the Town a say in any future adapted reuse of the site and ensure that they are complimentary with the use of Hillary House.

The long-term sustainability of Hillary House is important to help preserve the history of the Town and also to promote future revitalization of the Downtown Area, concludes the report. Based on discussions with land developers and real estate experts, staff do not believe there are any advantages to the Town purchasing Horton Place and Readman House and then trying to obtain a private partner to develop an adaptive re-use plan for the land.