

INSIDE AURORA: The Jewel in the Crown

By Scott Johnston

Petch House is in the news again.

It's certainly had an interesting history.

It was apparently built by a one-legged sailor from Yorkshire, and it's one of the oldest buildings in the area.

Over the years it's been home to both founding members of the community (through the 1800s), and a variety of Aurora's wildlife.

The latter occupants were primarily through the early 2000s when the building was moved from its original site to a temporary location on Leslie.

While the critters flourished for ten years amongst the slowly decaying structure, debates raged on about what to do with it.

Should it be preserved? Where would it be moved to? What would it be used for?

After much discussion, the first two of those questions were answered. The house was preserved, and it was set up near the Seniors' Centre.

This second move elevated Petch House's status from not only being one of the oldest buildings in the area, but also one of the most well-travelled.

The final result did not come easily. It took a lot of hours of planning, a lot of physical labour, and a lot of money - almost \$120,000 - to get it to that stage.

But in the end the building looked great. Maybe not quite like the original version, but a close facsimile. Some described it as the new jewel in Aurora's crown.

The only thing not sorted out was the answer to the question of what purpose it would serve.

Various ideas were floated; wedding venue, tourist information centre, tea room, daycare, and Sports Hall of Fame, amongst others. Implementation of any of these was hampered at the time by the unfortunate lack of plumbing, electricity, flooring and proper climate control.

I guess these were considered out-of-budget extras, and shows that Aurora was well versed in not including everything in project budgets well before the more recent example of the Joint Operations Centre.

Four years later, Petch House still looks good, but continues to suffer from a lack of users, not to mention plumbing and other infrastructure, so a whole new bunch of ideas have come forward on what to do with it. Actually, they're all pretty much the same old ideas as last time, but at least they're in the spotlight again.

One that's being seriously considered that caught my attention is to use it as a storage building.

That's right; the Town will have invested hundreds of hours of debate and study over almost 15 years, not to mention \$120,000, to turn a 170-year-old building into a glorified shed, something that one could order in the same size from a home renovation store for less than a tenth of what the Town has poured so far in the original.

Council has asked staff to provide yet more reports detailing what additional funding it might take to retrofit Petch House to be a wedding venue, or something more than just a roof over the Town's out of season Christmas decorations, or whatever storage we apparently desperately need.

I'm not excited about spending even more money on this structure, but we've come this far, so if it's within reason, we owe it to our Town's history, and all those who have put so much into this project, to invest a bit more to make this building live up to its potential.

Better that Petch House be the jewel in Aurora's crown, not the box the crown is stored in.

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