

Landmark 'Red House' could be moved after 180 years



By Brock Weir

The Red House's name is as good a descriptor as any for the red-brick home that has stood on the southeast corner of Yonge Street and St. John's Sideroad since 1840.

But now, after 176 years of being a primary landmark and one of three surviving buildings of the former hamlet of Cosford's Corners, the site, and the historic home that is on it, could soon be transformed.

The Red House, which gained fame in the 1960s and 1970s as the home studio of renowned artist and historical preservationist Dorothy Clark McClure and, until earlier this year, most recently served as the Oakland Hall restaurant, is the subject of a plan now in the works which will likely see it moved to another location on site to make way for a potential new condominium complex.

According to Sharon Vattay, Heritage Specialist with the architectural firm Goldsmith, Borgal & Company, two scenarios are currently being examined for the site. The first would see the house moved closer to Yonge Street to make way for development closer to Old Yonge Street in behind the present structure. The second option would be to move the house further back from Yonge, while still facing the street, to free up room for a future development.

Ms. Vattay presented each scenario, accompanied by property owners Fabrizio Lucchese and Gordon Steel, to Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee, seeking input from members before they delve into the hard work of drafting a plan and filing the necessary development applications with the Town.

'The first option would be to intensify the site and that would require moving the Red House forward, closer to Yonge Street and that would clear up the plateau of land which would allow for some development in behind,' said Ms. Vattay. 'Scenario number two comes about because there is an agreement in place to purchase the adjacent property to the north and the building could be relocated there, freeing up new areas to be developed on the plateau area and separating the designated building from this new development, all the while addressing the environmental sensitivities on the site as well.'

While Ms. Vattay conceded she understood there might be 'some hesitation' over the relocation of the building both from philosophical and logistical standpoints, she showed several examples of work their company has completed across southern Ontario, including the relocation of a historic mansion in the heart of Downtown Toronto.

'There are pros and cons to both scenarios that I would like you to think about,' she told the Committee. 'The cons of having it on site is it is very hard to successfully introduce a larger building behind a heritage house. The pros and cons of moving it to Old

Yonge Street, the con is it is losing its original location but the pros are many because it could be returned to a residential use and there are many options of designing an addition.?

Stakeholders came to the Committee in this early stage to collect feedback to shape their plan and members didn't disappoint with some members saying moving the building was an inevitability, while others were either firmly opposed or leaving the door open for future talks.

?My preference would be not to move it,? said committee member Martin Paivio. ?It has presence and I think it would be a shame to have it moved.?

Added fellow member Barry Bridgeford: ?I would like to see it retain its visual relationship to Yonge Street. One of your proposals would keep it in more or less a visual line. It could be closer to Yonge Street, but it would be occupying more or less the same position from Yonge Street. The other proposal of moving it north I am aghast at because it is no longer in its traditional historical context. I have this leery thought of moving that delicate old masonry house even westward that short distance.?

This was a concern shared by Councillor Jeff Thom, Chair of the Heritage Advisory Committee, citing a number of recent examples over the course of the past two years where the moving or partial demolition of a heritage structure has led to issues resulting in the buildings being damaged and ultimately written off.

?It almost sounds too good to be true that you can move it and there are never any problems, but in that short time as a committee this year we have had some problems,? he said. ?We're constantly barraged with the need for intensification, and I can appreciate that. The Province puts immense pressure on municipalities to conform, but we do also have these designations and the Ontario Heritage Act that allow us to set aside properties that should remain as they are and have great historical value.?

Ms. Vattay and her associates offered several examples of successful moves, noting that this one would be done right.

?Because the heritage part of this development is a sensitive issue [it was recommended] that we do communicate with this committee early on so that we can get that feedback before it is designed onto paper, which then seems more set,? she said. ?We're doing that to make you part of the plan.?

This was an aspect, in particular, that appealed to Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

?This is a very significant opportunity for us,? said Councillor Gaertner. ?Thank you for including us so early in the process so hopefully we can have some meaningful input and that we can all be pleased at the end of the day, which would be best.?