

Local leaders praise first responders as Aurora loses landmark



By Brock Weir

Local leaders from all levels of government praised York Region's first responders in their handling of the fire which tore through Aurora United Church on Friday.

Among those on hand watching the scene unfold were Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and Member of Provincial Parliament Frank Klees.

Members of the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), the amalgamated fire unit which serves Aurora and Newmarket, were not the only responders who were on the scene. In addition to the York Regional Police and York Region EMS, mutual assistance agreements in place also secured the support of fire crews from Richmond Hill, King Township, Georgina, Markham, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury, and Vaughan.

"This is a devastating loss for our community and thankfully no one was injured," said Mayor Dawe in a statement. "The Town of Aurora will be working closely with Aurora United Church staff to provide assistance in this time of crisis."

As he watched the blaze from a parking lot adjacent to the church, along with Aurora CAO Neil Garbe and CYFS Chief Ian Laing, he said he found it difficult to find adequate words, but in the days since has been inundated with calls from people from as far away as Ottawa looking for ways to support the church in the hard months ahead.

"It was such an integral part of our Town," he said. "It was one of those things you drive by every day and you almost take it for granted. When something like this happens, it really brings home what it has meant to the community. For many people, that has been their spiritual home for many years, but there are community services they run out of the United Church. When something like this happens so dramatically and so violently it really gives you pause for thought."

Speaking on Friday afternoon as the CYFS started to get the fire under control, Mr. Klees praised first responders for the swiftness in which they answered the call. He described the blaze as a "tragedy for the town", but said he was grateful there was no loss of life or injury.

"It saddens me," he said. "This is a landmark not only for the Town of Aurora, York Region and, frankly, the province. I think of the services I have attended and what was always magnificent to me was the historical context. Whether it was the pews, whether it was the stained glass, the acoustics that you can only find in a historic church, this is a tremendous loss. I empathize with the congregation who, over the years, have supported this church and, of course, the investment that was made in the recent renovations.

"It is a very, very sad day."

Added Councillor Chris Ballard: ?This is an absolute disaster for the parishioners, for all Aurorans and the downtown. The members of this church have done so much for the community over the years and I know the community will pull together to help them overcome this.

?They say that the church is the people and not the building, but this is awful and I feel for them.?

On Saturday, standing at the Aurora Home Show where a water jug was turned into a makeshift collection for money to help support the church, MP Lois Brown spoke of the connection the Church had in the lives of so many Aurorans.

?The church is a building, but the church is the community of people who meet there,? she said, noting she spent a lot of time in the church as a teen honing her music. ?I know these people are going to gather together, they are going to rebuild, and stay strong in the community. Whatever new facility we see coming out of this is going to house the heart and soul of the people who make up this community.?

Ms. Brown also noted several years ago when the church was raising funds for a new organ, she was one of the ones who purchased a piece of pipe for a nominal fee to help support the cause. It is something she still has today. Donating it back to the church, she said, would be giving them back a piece of their history.