

Mayor, Councillor move to stop 'demolition by decay'

By Brock Weir

Some property owners have been criticized for taking the easy way out - that is, letting heritage buildings on their lands decay past the point of no return rather than going through a proper demolition process.

But Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillor Sandra Humfries are working to make 'demolition by decay' a thing of the past with new stringent measures that will impact owners of heritage properties.

The duo will introduce a motion in the coming weeks that will open up the arsenal available to communities like Aurora under the Municipal Act and jacking up the penalties against such demolitions wherever they can.

The Mayor announced the move at last week's Council meeting where local lawmakers continued to seek answers after a designated building with an equestrian history on the southeast corner of St. John's Sideroad and Leslie Street was razed to the ground before Council formally signed off on de-listing the property.

As The Auroran reported last week, Council raised alarm bells earlier this month after buildings on the property were demolished before the property owners' demolition permit had worked its way through the system.

The property in question, according to a report from Municipal Planner Adam Robb, is considered a 'worker house estate' with a two-storey brick residence dating from the 1960s, along with an equestrian complex from the same era. The property also held a 19th century barn, a one-storey mid-century cottage, and a further residence dating from after 1927.

A Cultural Heritage Assessment and Heritage Working Group evaluation found that the property as a whole did not meet Provincial standards for heritage preservation, nor did any of the individual buildings on site, but staff recommended a heritage plaque be installed.

The lands are slated to redevelopment as part of Aurora's 2C Plan and the property owners submitted a demolition permit earlier this year. Under regulations, the Town had 60 days for the application to move through the system, including review from the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee and, finally, Council. But property owners beat Council to the punch.

Councillors raised a number of questions on the subject at the April 2 General Committee meeting and Councillor John Gallo continued the questions last week.

?We have had some internal discussions with [our Legal Department] on the next steps,? said David Waters, Aurora's Director of Planning, after Councillor Gallo asked what work had been done on the file in the intervening week. ?We haven't finalized it, but one of the options we're looking at is for the developer to provide the Town with a financial contribution as a condition of Draft Plan approval to the Heritage Reserve Fund. That appears to be the best solution moving forward, but we haven't finalized that.?

Councillor Gallo asked that Council be in the loop regarding that process going forward and Mr. Waters noted that next steps would be subject to a further Council report.

?I was at the [Heritage Advisory Committee] meeting and members were quite concerned over this and looking for staff to come back with some report or status on what we can do,? said Councillor Sandra Humfryes on the demolition issue. ?I know in the past, we have done a charge or an increment of monetary value against the incorrect process, so we're hoping to hear back for sure.?

But these concerns could translate into further action. According to Mayor Mrakas, they are joining forces on a motion they hope will lead to a practical deterrent against future demolitions such as these.

?We have seen it again recently with demolition by neglect,? said the Mayor. ?Councillor Humfryes [and I] have been working with staff to finally, once and for all, come up with a solution for this issue and we'll be presenting that Notice of Motion Shortly.

?I think, at the end of the day, we only have so many tools that we're allowed to use as far as any penalties through legislation on the Provincial side through the Heritage Act. What we're trying to do is come up with some solutions and some cost penalties within the tools that are afforded to us through the Municipal Act. There are quite a few of them and they are extensive. We will put something in front of Council, we have been working on it, and once and for all we can hopefully stop this from happening within our community.?