

Neighbours divided over Heritage District plans



By Brock Weir

Planners behind a proposed second Heritage Conservation District in Aurora looked for characteristics that unified a community but these plans left a community divided last week.

Residents in the southeast quadrant of Yonge and Wellington filled Council Chambers last Tuesday evening to speak out against plans to turn their neighbourhood, roughly bordered by the north side of Wellington Street East in the north, the GO Tracks at its most easterly point, Rotary Park at the southern limit and Victoria Street in the west, into a Heritage Conservation District (HCD) which was due to be moved to the next level.

According to Carl Bray, the consultant retained by the Town to oversee plans for the district, the area in question is where Aurora can find its earliest roots and an area which has developed a particular character.

The point of district designation under the Heritage Act is to identify that character, describe it and put it in a form that can be served and enhanced over time, said Mr. Bray. Designation is a form of change management. It is not pickling, it is not stopping time, and it is not falsely pretending we all live back in an earlier era. It is an attempt to manage how the community evolves over time and [to] essentially secure the investments people have already made and may make in the future in that area.

From Mr. Bray's perspective, the parameters of the area have not been set in stone. Boundaries could change. Policies that will define the plan in the future are still undetermined, and Council's vote would advance things to the next level.

It gives staff and the public a roadmap of the types of things that would best make that area not only shine in its current form, but also be improved in the future. In [the northeast Heritage District], the emphasis is primarily on architecture. Here, it is much more of a cultural landscape of open space, streetscapes, some important buildings, but a lot of what we would call background buildings.

The sky doesn't fall when you designate a district. In fact, what it does is confirm your investment and stabilizes your area. It lowers the risk for property owners and for potential investors. In terms of property values, it has been shown that it either stabilizes property values or actually increases them.

It is here that Mr. Bray's views diverged most significantly from the neighbours in the audience speaking out against the plan. A district like this, they said, would not confirm their investment in the area, but put what they have already invested in the area at risk and, at the end of the day, put a dent in their property values.

Joanne Russo was first up, saying she found certain parts of the HCD unacceptable and concerning. It was over-regulated, she said, would affect property values, and put unreasonable limits on what they could do with their own properties and, in turn, reduce

the 'marketability' of their lands. Grants and other incentive programs, she added, would, in her view, result in the loss of certain 'ownership rights' on their properties.

'Listing gives authority to the Heritage Planner to require an architect or specialist contractor to be employed if any renovations need to be done to properties,' said Ms. Russo. 'Our concern is those restrictions prohibit us from using our own contractors, especially if we had a certain budget we want to abide by.'

'Our neighbourhood is very vibrant. We have long-term owners who have been there and easily adopted to modern changes in the community and have not seen any loss in character of the downtown area, all of which have been provided through private funds. The designation is intended to freeze the neighbourhood in time with no prospect for future growth. We do not consider the prospect of a heritage designation to benefit property owners at all. We wish to be excluded from the Heritage Designation as it is our view we will lose any value moving forward, especially with long-term growth.'

Realtor Lynn Knowles expressed a similar view. In her profession, she said, heritage preservation can be viewed as a public good, but it can directly affect property and real estate activity. Large blocks set aside for heritage designation, she added, could result in 'property owners being deprived of their natural rights', when any wishes to alter their own properties would need to be cleared by bodies such as Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee and, ultimately Council. Such groups would also be able to accept or deny any demolition permits, changes to the land itself, or even expropriate properties, she argued.

'Along with other inherent restrictions, buyers may well re-think their decision to buy or at least pay top dollar to a seller in the district,' she said. 'As a realtor, I am obliged on both my listing forms and my agreement of purchase and sale to disclose in writing the pertinent facts. New district designation bylaws are now registered on title. There is an inherent risk in buying or selling properties in the southeast quadrant that still need renovating, repair or demolition.'

'This is not a walk in the Town Park.'

These delegates, as well as local orthodontist Don Stubbs, were clear they wanted, at the very least, properties on Wellington Street East to be excluded from the heritage area. These views, Dr. Stubbs added, were supported by other neighbours not in attendance who were concerned such a move would essentially make the Town co-owners of their properties.

Outside of the Council chamber, meetings held earlier in the evening represented a more diverse opinion on the heritage district. The Heritage Advisory Committee, along with Mr. Bray, hosted a public information session for neighbours and the community as a whole to learn more about the proposed area. The well-attended meeting attracted the curious and supporters of the plan.

Resident Nancee Webb, for instance, lives in a newer home within the wider proposed Heritage District. She said she was concerned what would happen to newer homes if the entire area came under the district plans. She said she was somewhat reassured it would have little impact on the property, but was still cautious about future plans.

'I am waiting to hear what comes out of Council,' she said. 'I am still not 100 per cent comfortable because they are very smooth talking and I am just not quite comfortable yet.'

Resident Krista Jackson, however, was more enthusiastic.

'I have an interest in maintaining a sense of culture in the area, something that is relevant and tangible for our children to know where we've been and where we are going, so I am in favour of the plan,' she said. 'I am more curious as to why people are so opposed to moving forward with it.'

'When you are living in a cookie-cutter subdivision, how can you learn to take pride in the community if you don't have anything unique?'