

New Heritage Conservation District formally halted

By Brock Weir

Aurora's second Heritage Conservation District was consigned to the history books this week, after Councillors backed neighbourhood opposition to the plan.

Faced with four options on how to proceed last week, Councillors voted 7 ? 0 to discontinue the Heritage Conservation (HCD) study at the General Committee level. This decision is due to be ratified at Council this week.

The decision came after mounting opposition from a majority of residents and property owners of the proposed HCD area bordered roughly by Wellington Street in the north, Rotary Park in the south, Berczy Street in the east and Victoria Street in the west. The HCD was the subject of numerous heated debates around the Council table, at Public Planning meetings, as well as at Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee, where the number of voices opposed to the plan handily overshadowed the equally enthusiastic voices in favour of designating their neighbourhood.

After both sides were heard at a Public Planning meeting last month, Council voted to give a month for everyone's concerns to be weighted and compiled in a report. With that window closing last Tuesday, both sides filled the Council chambers to hear their decision and the cheers that rang out with the Committee's vote indicated the vast support from those in attendance.

Last week, Councillor Evelyn Buck was first to speak out against the HCD plan. Noting her opposition to it from the get go, she said she "wholeheartedly" supported residents in their opposition to going forward with the second phase of the HCD study.

"From the perspective of the municipality, [it is] of no benefit to the Town to carry out this study," said Councillor Buck. "There has never been a business plan presented to suggest where the benefits would be to the municipality. There was nothing more than a request at the time by three or four residents who came here to ask that the quadrant be designated."

She also praised the residents in opposition for coming forward with well-prepared and well-researched arguments outlining their position. These, she said, provided a learning experience for all members of Council.

One thing which was not as well prepared was communication by Town Hall with the residents directly impacted by a proposed HCD, argued Councillor John Gallo.

In making his decision, he said he weighed two main factors. The first was the "importance of governments imposing these types of things on properties" as well as where Aurora might be in the future with redevelopment and the issue of "monster homes", which was one of the concerns proponents of the HCD plan brought forward.

"We are at build-out once 2C is built out," said Councillor Gallo. "Clearly there is going to be a lot of pressure to infill and these types of areas might be susceptible to that and developers maybe [do not] feel there is an economic benefit to redeveloping properties with [these] guidelines. I am trying to balance these things and, in the middle of that, clearly there are homeowners."

"The way I gauged it was if we didn't have this opposition, would we be here right now, or would we have plowed through this and it wouldn't have been an issue? Clearly, if the chambers weren't full and the emails weren't there, people weren't telling us they don't want this [we might have] plowed through this no different than we did in the northeast quadrant. Maybe they were less organized, maybe they grasped it better, or maybe they wanted it and we went ahead with it."

Looking over Heritage Conservation Districts elsewhere was a key factor in Councillor Michael Thompson voting against proceeding with the HCD, he said. For him, a community buy-in on the plan was essential and it just wasn't there.

"Everywhere I have read with regards to provincial guidelines and heritage districts, they all speak to the same thing that for a Heritage District to be successful, you need widespread support," said Councillor Thompson. "Reports from other municipalities use

words like 'enthusiastic support' or 'overwhelming support' and while we do not have a litmus test to gauge whether or not residents want a heritage district, it is quite obvious that language [elsewhere] is not here in ours at this point in time.

'We don't have overwhelming support, it is not enthusiastic, widespread or substantial. There is division and I think that is a large cause for concern for us, even going back to the Heritage Consultant's report.'

Speaking near the start of the evening were Councillors Sandra Humfries and John Abel Both Councillors sit on Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee and have been vocal proponents of moving the plan forward, at least to its Phase 2 stage. While they ultimately decided to go with the majority of the room last week, they still said there would have been some value, at the end of the day, to proceed to the next level and perform further community consultation at that point.

'This was an initiative that was brought forward and something that was wanted to be done,' said Councillor Humfries on the development of the plan until that point. 'I was surprised getting the email concerns, and there were a lot of them. I also received a lot of support of the initiative, so it is a very difficult situation for us here. This was supposed to be a positive [initiative] and from the bottom of my heart, I apologise to what has happened in the neighbourhood [with] residents upset by it and upset with each other.'

Added Councillor Abel: 'The idea was conservation would foster community revitalization, it would encourage tourism, it would enhance property values, create jobs, develop skills, foster a sense of place, encouraging a distinct and attractive area for residents, workers and visitors. The plan calls for an overwhelming majority to be in support for it to go forward. It is apparent that that does not exist.

'I would say I would support the majority of people and those who have spoken. I would like to see the study. It speaks to our Cultural Master Plan, our Promenade Study, our Official Plan, Strategic Plan, and this is a study I would like to add to the resources we have in our Town. I am not here to make hardships. I am only here at the will of the majority of residents and if they say they don't want it, I have no problem with that. I think it is very valuable information we will learn.'