

Oakland Hall proposal sparks heated planning debate

By Brock Weir

A proposal to move historic Oakland Hall to make way for a 10-storey apartment development sparked a heated discussion around the Council table regarding the future of local planning.

Reiterating a position stated the previous week, Council once again voted not to allow a zoning amendment application from the owners of the Oakland Hall/Red House property on Yonge Street, just south of St. John's Sideroad, along with two other zoning amendment applications, at last week's Council meeting.

While some of the previous week's discussion centred on whether the applications should be approved, if only to allow the proposals to move forward to a future public planning meeting so the full merits of the plans could be discussed ? a position held by Mayor Geoff Dawe ? last week focused on the future of planning in Aurora as a whole.

?The [property owners] have put forward what their intentions are and I think if we don't look at those intentions we're not doing our due diligence and coming up with a clear understanding of how to, in essence, protect our town [and] protect against overdevelopment,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas.

Councillor Mrakas was responding to comments from Councillor John Abel who argued allowing the developers to go to the next step in the process was normal procedure as the applications were filed at Town Hall in 2015, well before Aurora put a moratorium in place pending changes to the Planning Act currently making their way through the Ontario Legislature.

These changes, once passed, are likely to lead to significant overhauls of the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), the unelected arm's length review panel put in place by the Province to act largely as mediators between municipalities and developers on a host of related issues.

?When you look at what's going on right now, personally I think we in Aurora are in a very good situation,? Councillor Mrakas continued. ?We have aligned ourselves very well to the upcoming reforms at the OMB. We're looking at a month or two months. Why would we give up our upper hand? We have control right now of not allowing builders and developers to come in and propose things that, quite frankly, don't fit in our community and fit within our official plan and don't fit within our zoning, don't meet any of those requirements. Why would we look at receiving [the application] and allowing it to fall into a process that would ultimately land at the OMB, who considerably favour the development community.?

If Council does not do its ?due diligence,? he concluded, then ?we are not doing our jobs to protect our community against overdevelopment.?

Councillor Michael Thompson, another leading proponent around the Council table for OMB reform, was on a similar wavelength. Councillors, sitting at the Committee level, spoke resoundingly against the Oakland Hall application as a whole, so he questioned why any members of Council would support sending it through to the next level.

?Why would you accept the application if you were going to reject it outright at the public planning meeting?? he asked. ?That, to me, is a waste of time and money. Whether you like it or not, if they get into the queue and they don't like what Council says or does, they have the right to go to the OMB and put any application forward. They can use their original design or their amended design and then we run the risk. Why, on the eve of the Bill being passed, giving municipalities the ability to [determine] planning in their own communities would we open the crack of allowing the possibility of a 10 or 11 storey building??

Speaking in favour of the application, Mayor Dawe stressed that he is not in favour of a 10 storey proposal taking the place of Oakland Hall while one of the last remaining buildings of the largely vanished hamlet of Cosford's Corners is moved one lot north to the corner of Yonge and St. John's, he was in favour of the process.

?If the whole intent of this moratorium was specifically to frustrate anyone coming forward, and maybe that is not the right word, so they couldn't go through the OMB process then that should have been explained to Council,? he said. ?[If the Bill] doesn't pass, if the regulations don't fall out the way they want, or if an election this spring happens to change things around and go back to where we were, we're in the same pickle, we're back in a situation where all we've done is delay someone for a year and a half. If we are truly interested in protecting our residents overall, we need to have this kind of issue clearly stated up front as to what the goal is.?