

Our Lady of Grace makeover now underway



By Brock Weir

A plan to give Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church a significant makeover and give the place of worship a landmark new steeple and expansion is now underway after Council approval this past spring.

The renovation and expansion of Our Lady of Grace, which sits on Yonge Street between Catherine Avenue and Maple Street, will include a new largely glass façade featuring views of Yonge, a reconfigured parking lot, the demolition of Lynett Hall, and the restoration of the Catherine Avenue home to which the church hall is currently attached.

The proposals went through Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee earlier this year and came out with several recommendations from members, including a new entrance on Yonge and landscaping adjustments to act as a traffic buffer to Maple, and these revised plans have been approved by Council.

‘We received comments from the public with respect to enhancing the landscaping along the [Maple] edge and the landscaping plans do reflect additional landscaping along the entire edge of the property,’ Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, told Council at the Committee level ahead of their ultimate approval. ‘We will ensure that gets incorporated into the development.’

‘The two key comments that came from the public at HAC was the landscaping. The other comment was incorporating a front door along that west elevation and the applicant has incorporated that. I think that is reflected in the colour rendering that has been provided to Council. There are three glass panels along that addition and the centre panel includes a door entrance.’

For Councillors Jeff Thom and Wendy Gaertner, this Yonge Street access was key. Historically seen as Aurora's ‘main street’, Yonge Street is currently Our Lady of Grace's formal frontage with stairs sweeping down to the sidewalk below. This has lent itself to becoming a landmark, they say, and something which should be maintained.

‘This is a very interesting situation because this is one of our landmarks,’ said Councillor Gaertner. ‘It is on Yonge Street, it has an address on Yonge Street, its main part, the bulk of the structure, and perhaps the most recognizable part of the structure faces onto Yonge Street. As Councillor Thom said, it used to be a large, very attractive, welcoming entrance and not only is this on one of our main streets, it is also part of the Promenade Plan. With respect to the door? you have a double wooden door that goes into another part of the building. With the main entrance, the most important entrance, it is a single door flanked by two windows. I think at the very least it needs to be a double door.’

‘When it came to HAC, we were thrilled. We want this church to be as functioning and as wonderful as it can possibly be. We talked about screening and additional parking and all the elements that are going to make this a wonderful restoration. My point and the committee's point about the front door is the front doors draw the community into the field of this church, into the importance of it to the community.’

‘It is not a criticism, it is an ask to continue to make Our Lady of Grace, which has been a very important part of our community for a very long time, continue that view on Yonge Street, that welcoming entrance. Perhaps it won't be used as much as it is now, but it adds to the look and the feel of our heritage, not only of the Town but also our historical Yonge Street and promenade area. We want

to make things better, not difficult and we think that a beautiful door at the former entrance to the building would add to the streetscape and to the look of the church.?

Additional concerns were noted by Councillor John Abel on behalf of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee which, he said, determined the entrance ramp was ?in the wrong place and excessively long.

?We made recommendations that emergency escape routes should have consideration for how people were going to ? because they only have one way to get in and out on a ramp,? he said.

Council, as a whole, was largely positive over the designs, with Councillor Tom Mrakas saying it would be a benefit to the Town as a whole.

?This has been a lot of work by the church and congregation putting this together and bringing this forward in an application I think not only suits their needs, but I think also continues to make this a focal point for our downtown core,? said Councillor Mrakas. ?I appreciate all the work they have done in bringing this forward and I am looking forward to seeing this completed and showing it off to the whole Town.?

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: ?I think overall this is a fantastic plan. I am thrilled the church is going to have an opportunity to expand. It's needed very urgently and I am thrilled with it, I love the entrance. I understand Councillor Gaertner's comments about the double door. I think the lovely glass, to me, makes it very obvious it is an entrance. I think it is lovely and I can't wait to see it come to fruition.?

Now being taken in phases, the revamp is expected to be complete in November 2019.