

Our Lady of Grace plans extensive rebuild of Catholic church



By Brock Weir

It has been the spiritual home of Aurora's Catholic Community since it was built on Yonge Street in 1983, but Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church is set to get a significant facelift.

Plans for extensive refurbishment of Our Lady of Grace (OLG) Catholic Church include a dramatic overhaul of the Yonge Street frontage including tearing down the existing portico for a 171 square metre glass-enclosed narthex, a 10 square metre sanctuary at the east end of the church, a significant steeple on the northwest corner of the building, and a complete demolition of the adjacent Lynett Hall, which has been a gathering place for the Catholic community since the 1960s, to be replaced to with a 54 square metre addition onto the south side of the building.

The local Roman Catholic community have called this site home for 72 years. Previously worshiping at De La Salle College, now a Government of Ontario facility, at Yonge Street and Bloomington Road, the parish moved to northward to Maple Street on land ? and an estate house ? owned by the prominent Fleury family.

The congregation grew and a first purpose-built church, combined with the first home to Our Lady of Grace Catholic Elementary School, was built on the site in the mid-1950s before the Fleury's Inglehurst estate was purchased by the church and demolished to make way for the present building.

?The existing church was built in 1983 [with] Colonial Revival architecture,? said Jeff Healey, Heritage Planner for the Town of Aurora. ?It was kind of a unique architectural style that was popular at the time. [They] plan some significant changes to the existing church: they will remove the existing portico on the north end of the site, replacing that with a narthex and a steeple. The new sanctuary on the east end of the church, and specifically to Lynett Hall and 16 Catherine Avenue, it will result in the removal of the hall and a suitable two-storey addition in its place.

?As far as the Colonial Revival architecture, a lot of those features are being removed from the church and it is being modernized in a way, but also complimentary to the church that is there today and keeping in mind the heritage district it is in. It is removing an addition that would, in the policies of today's district plan, wouldn't meet the [Heritage Conservation District] plan in the first place. I think it is a positive change to at least have a suitable addition in its place instead that would be more characteristic of the district. ? Plans for the revitalized church hit Aurora's citizen-led Heritage Advisory Committee last week, and although the plans were approved en route to Council consideration, they were met with decidedly mixed reviews.

At the start of the meeting, a neighbour on adjacent Maple Avenue appeared before Committee members and architects involved in the planning of the renovations to stress the need for trees and shrubs that should be planted to buffer the surrounding community from the church's busy parking lot. These concerns were taken into account and reflected in the motion ultimately approved by the Committee, but most of the discussion surrounded the merits of the architectural merits themselves.

Some members of the Committee, including Councillor Wendy Gaertner, balked at the suggestion from architects and staff that this was a ?refurbishment.? It was, they argued, a significant rebuild of nearly the entire site.

?They are proposing a couple of minor additions of a couple of thousand square feet of additional space to the church,? said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, in response to these concerns. ?It is really a front facelift. We're talking about significant

changes, not that they are adding much in the way of square footage. Since I have been here, in the last 10 years, [OLG has] had plans to rebuild completely, rear down and move the structure. For a variety of reasons, and funding being primary, they have arrived at the scenario where it is a renovation.?

Content that the OLG community was staying on Yonge Street, the issue of rebuild vs. refurbishment remained a thorny one, with former councillor Bob McRoberts making a successful motion that there be a letter of credit to maintain the structural integrity of the nearby Catherine Street building to which Lynett Hall is currently attached.

?We haven't had very good luck,? said Mr. McRoberts of other projects approved by the Committee ? and, later Council ? promising the retention of a heritage structure only to have it demolished at a later date.

Added Councillor Jeff Thom: ?It has to be significant enough that it shows the Town is serious about maintaining the building. I think if a structural report comes back and says we can't get rid of Lynett Hall without ripping down the whole house, I think the Committee would be a bit different in its opinion.?

Ultimately, however, the biggest issue the Committee had with the design itself was the Yonge Street façade.

As proposed, the new plans would move the main entrance of the church from Yonge Street, to the north side of the new narthex by the new steeple, which was greeted with a thumbs-down.

?It is too big and unfriendly to a certain degree,? said Committee member Neil Asselin, a view which was shared by Councillor Gaertner, who added, ?The steeple looks way out of proportion to the rest of the building.?

Mr. Asselin continued: ?The architect has embraced a style of church that has been around for millennia, but has abandoned the standards of that style in favour of a parking lot and it comes across as unfriendly, where a church should be welcoming. It is not for me to say how to run your church [but] the streetscape is quite massive. There is no sense of place and no sense of entry ? and that is a very important psychological element in terms of public buildings.?

The Heritage Advisory Committee recommends a Yonge Street entrance be added to the narthex.