

Petch House renovations will pave the way for future wedding chapel

A formal use for Aurora's historic Petch House will soon be a reality.

Aurora's oldest existing home, a log house which once stood near the present-day intersection of Wellington Street East and Highway 404, which was subsequently moved, restored and reconstructed behind the Aurora Seniors' Centre in 2014, will see new life as a civil wedding venue following a Council decision last week.

Council signed off on a renovation plan, which is estimated to cost \$50,000 funded by the Town's Heritage Reserve Fund, on May 28.

Petch House's future has been the subject of speculation for more than a decade.

Since it was re-dedicated after the reconstruction, it has been used for storage, a space for occasional municipal programs, and as venue for the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, Mrs. Claus, and their reindeer squad to hold court during Town-led Easter and Christmas celebrations.

The new move will allow the Town a permanent place to hold civil wedding ceremonies, a service offering that has only grown in popularity over the years, and have typically taken place on Fridays in Council Chambers.

\$50,000 will be used to make basic improvements to the structure for these purposes, including additional lighting, accessibility improvements, a security system and an upgraded floor system.

"Petch House is a desirable location for small weddings due to its central location to Town Hall, local restaurants, highway access points and natural green space for wedding photos," said Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services, in a report to Council this spring. "Guests would check in at Town Hall with Access Aurora and the delegated wedding officiant would accompany the wedding party to the Petch House to conduct the service. Petch House would also be well-used for pictures along [the Aurora Community Arboretum]."

"Based on the short duration of each civil ceremony (less than 30 minutes per service) it would be staff's recommendation to proceed with minimal improvements to the Petch House. Further additional enhancements could be considered if demand for civil ceremonies continues to rise; however, for the current expected use, a minimal level of work is needed to make this space a functioning wedding chapel that is marketable for the current trends in the wedding service industry - rustic, private/intimate, wedding-ready with no additional cost of rentals for couples looking for a small space."

At last month's Committee of the Whole meeting, funding and purpose were still in question as some wondered whether more money from the Reserve Fund should be spent to fully outfit the historic building, while others said the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee was "split" on the path forward.

"I think in order to pay proper respect to Petch House and its history and how we got the developer to bring it back to Aurora and set it up, why wouldn't we use the money in the Heritage Fund to make Petch House completely functional?" asked Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "I voted against this originally because I thought it just wasn't doing enough, and maybe it's the chicken-or-the-egg scenario that if we don't do everything to make it fully functional, how do we know if it is going to be truly used by the community?"

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese offered a different viewpoint.

Citing feedback from the Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC), he questioned what other funding sources have been explored and any opportunities in the offing to "replenish" the Heritage Fund.

?The Committee was a little bit split,? said Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo of the HAC feedback. ?One person had an issue with spending that money for this considering?it's stuff we would probably categorize as maintenance to a heritage building. There was another member who said they didn't have a problem with spending it?..?

But, he added, he had a hesitation with allocating this funding considering the uncertainty over the Town's future Development Charge revenues.

?I am of the opinion we should step back and re-assess until we have a solid plan on an extremely serious financial issue we find ourselves in,? he concluded.

By Brock Weir