

Plans for house in Heritage Conservation District sparks heated words following Council meeting

A family's plan to replace their home in Aurora's Heritage Conservation District (HCD) after it was gutted by fire last year sparked a volley of social media posts between Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillor Rachel Gilliland last week.

At issue was a vote taken at the March 7 General Committee meeting to have the plans for a replacement house at 60 Fleury Street, constructed in Edwardian-style to fit in with the existing neighbourhood, referred to the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) for input before final approval.

?I hope it is evident in the report that my wife and I put a lot of thought and consideration around how to move forward since the house fire last January,? said resident Ryan Panet who brought forward the application. ?We have explored all the options and, in the end, we have determined it is best for us and our young family to remove what's left of the home and rebuild the house that we will ultimately feel really safe in and comfortable raising our three young children for the next several years.?

It was love at first sight for the family and the neighbourhood, he added, and quickly after moving in their children forged close bonds with their peers.

?We have all experienced some great times over the short time we were there,? he continued. ?Above all, it's got this beautiful charm that has developed over generations. We have a great deal of respect for the history and the heritage and everything about that community, but the reality is the most important factor in all of this when we were making our decisions is the safety of our family which comes before anything else. After experiencing a major fire in the middle of the night, it puts family and the safety of your family into great perspective. We followed a process, we brought in consultants and environmental engineers to provide reports and those findings are in the documents that you've received? but what I really want to impress upon you is we have taken every measure to replace the house with a design that honours the history of the neighbourhood and complies with every aspect of the HCD plan.

?It has not been an easy year on our family. We really just want to get back home, get our family back to the community. By the end of all of this our kids will have missed out on two years of friendships and bonding in the neighbourhood and for us as parents that's hard to watch. We're looking forward to just getting life back to normal again and closing this chapter and moving onto the next one.?

But the next step on the road to normal hinges on Council's March 28 meeting as Council tentatively opted on a vote of 4 ? 3 to refer plans to HAC for comment.

Tensions flared at the table over the decision and spilled over into social media the next day. In a post shared by Mayor Tom Mrakas, he said the move, if Council maintains its decision later this month, could put plans on ice for ?at least one to two months.?

?I along with Councillors Kim and Thompson believed that Council should make a decision that night, and approve the application to allow this family ? that has been without a home for over a year ? to start the process to rebuild,? he wrote, noting that the four in favour of sending it to HAC were Councillors Wendy Gaertner, John Gallo, Rachel Gilliland, and Ron Weese. ?Unfortunately, the other members of Council did not agree. And, on a motion by Councillor Weese, voted instead to refer the application to the Heritage Committee.

?Later that evening, under New Business, Councillor Thompson proposed to refer the additional report that staff had been tasked to write on finding creative solutions for pickleball courts to the Parks and Rec Committee,? the Mayor continued, adding, ?residents will note that a strategy to address the growing sport of pickleball is already included in the soon to be released Master Sport and Recreation Plan; this report comes to Council in just a few weeks.?

?Councillor Thompson argued that if Councillors believed that advisory committees should always provide comments before

making a decision, then the Parks and Rec committee should also provide comments on pickleball first before Council considers any decision.?

That vote failed along the same voting lines.

?If I understand the reasoning for the two decisions of Council in the majority then, it seems that getting an Aurora family closer to getting back into their home is NOT urgent, but getting a report on pickleball IS urgent,? said the Mayor, with his own emphasis. ?While I respect a Councillor's right to decide how they see fit, I share resident's concerns about the potential impact of the decision to refer the application to an advisory committee that will not even meet until May. I am saddened at the thought that it could delay the rebuilding of this family's home by months.?

The Mayor's statement on social media prompted a reply the following day from Councillor Gilliland, which she billed as an open letter.

Taking aim at how Mayor Mrakas moderates his Facebook group, Aurora ? Our Town, she said an environment for ?healthy debate? had not been fostered.

?While I feel for these residents and their experience, what is not told?is that at no point did Council say they could not build. At no point did the homeowner express the sense of urgency in a six-week delay to bypass a legislated mandated consultation from this committee and the family is currently living in another home in Aurora comfortably,? she wrote. ?Their architect knows very well the Heritage Committee process, where it's no surprise that a condition for comments from the Heritage Committee would be required? a Heritage Committee that is legislatively mandated.

?It's also critical to note that Aurora decided many years ago that this was a special ?Heritage Conservation District', an area that has special rules that apply over and above any other part of Town. If this was outside this district, my vote would have been different. What also failed to be mentioned, is that when Councillor Weese was asked, ?Were there any residents who reached out from this district that would like this review??"his answer was ?Yes,' so clearly some people in this District wanted the opinion from the Heritage Committee, which is what they are elected to do as a Provincially mandated committee.?

In the end, she said, Council approved demolition of 60 Fleury Street ?in preparation of the new build.?

?There is no intention to not approve a new home,? she said, but to respect the consultation process.

Mayor Mrakas declined to comment on Councillor Gilliland's post, but subsequently shared information from the staff report stating that, under Section 42 of the Ontario Heritage Act, the demolition of the existing property is Council's decision and that Council has to make a decision within 90 days of the permit application, or April 27.

?The Town is not ?required' to send the application to the Heritage Advisory Committee first; in instances when the committee is not available due to the election period (as is the case here), during summer months when they do not meet, applications can ? and do ? come directly to Council for a decision to be made, as Council is the ultimate authority in decision-making for Heritage matters under the act.

?Ultimately, this is about helping an Aurora family get on with their lives. We have an Aurora family that has been displaced for over a year, and they want to start rebuilding their home. This family has suffered tremendous loss and we need to do what we can to help ? not add more and unnecessary red tape. I am looking forward to Council's final decision at the March 28 Council meeting.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter