

Preserving historic business core to be reviewed by Committee following appeal

By Brock Weir

Attempts to designate 15 Yonge Street properties in Aurora's historic downtown business core will be reviewed by a Provincial committee after the Town formally received objections to the plan.

Council approved the first step in June designating 15 individual properties on Yonge Street between Wellington Street and Mosley Street as historically significant under the Ontario Heritage Act. It was an attempt to preserve the Victorian storefronts on what was traditionally Aurora's main street, particularly in an area that has been designated by the Province as a hotspot for intensification. Following Council's approval, the Town formally began the designation process this month, publishing public notices for all 15 properties in The Auroran, triggering a 30-day period in which members of the public can register their objections with the Town. Once an objection has been received this would then, in turn, trigger a separate process in which the matter would be referred to Ontario's Conservation Review Board (CRB) to review whether or not the properties in question do indeed have cultural heritage value.

The window to register objections closed Monday and, well before that, the Town received a letter from a lawyer making 15 separate objections, one for each property. Thus, the merits of all 15 properties will be reviewed by the CRB.

?As that window closes on September 10, it will be staff's responsibility to forward [the matter] to the Conservation Review Board,? planner Adam Robb told members of the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee last week. ?I am not sure when the CRB hearing will take place, but I would imagine several months after the September 10 deadline. The CRB is a non-binding body. They will take the Heritage Property report that we have prepared, they will take the objection letter that came in, prepare their own report to Council recommending essentially if this property is heritage. At the end of the day, it is Council's discretion.?

Indeed, the Conservation Review Board, founded in 1975, is a body of Environment & Land Tribunals Ontario, mandated under the Ontario Heritage Act. It considers a variety of issues ranging from the proposed designation of a property as having cultural heritage value or interest, to repealing bylaws, to property alterations. The Board focuses on a prehearing process and mediation efforts to settle disputes, as well. If this is not possible, the Board will make recommendations on the issue in question to either a municipal council or the relevant Ministry.

?Council would likely still say, ?regardless of what they say, we still want to designate it,? said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning. ?The next step is?to get those bylaws in front of Council for them to be passed, then they are formally registered on title.?

Mr. Robb agreed, adding, ?Just speaking frankly, these are heritage properties. The Conservation Review Board will recognize that too, but it is just a part of the process. It comes down to Council.?

While it will likely be a matter that comes down to the new Council, once its composition is determined in the October 22 municipal election, the outgoing Council was clear in its view that the 15 properties are clear examples of heritage significance.

The issue passed almost unanimously when it last hit the Council table, the only objections voiced being related to the process in which property owners were to be notified of the pending designation.

?My concern with this is that we have not engaged the owners at this point,? said Mayor Dawe at the time. ?We're looking at substantial changes to the status of their buildings and I think it would be appropriate to engage the owners. My suggestion is what we did with the fields that we're looking at [with] the Hallmark lands, refer that back to the Heritage Advisory Committee with a request that they engage the owners so they can have a robust discussion with the owners at the Committee and then come back to us as well.?

Councillor Jeff Thom, on the other hand, presented another viewpoint.

?Consultation will not change the facts,? he countered. ?These buildings are historical, they are important to the Town's not only character of our main street, but I think the character of our Town as a whole. No amount of consultation will change their importance. The buildings are historically important, the report is pretty clear: some of these buildings scored in the 90 per cent range, the 80 per cent range, massively important to the Town. In my mind, these buildings, regardless of whether the owners are for designation or are not in favour of [designation], are worthy of designation, worthy of protecting.?