

Property owner could appeal designation of Aurora's historic business core

By Brock Weir

Over the last few years, Benny Soscia has been buying up buildings in what is seen by many to be Aurora's historic downtown business core but now that Council has begun the process of designating six of his buildings under the Ontario Heritage Act, he could move to appeal the decision.

That was the message brought to Council last week on Mr. Soscia's behalf by Claudio Balbinot of Agora Research Group.

Responding to Council's move to designate a total of 15 historic storefronts on Yonge Street from Wellington Street in the north to Mosley Street in the south, Mr. Balbinot said area property owners had not been adequately consulted on the matter.

"This Council is aware that Mr. Soscia was at no point consulted on the evaluation process, nor was he notified at the meetings to consider the evaluations," said Mr. Balbinot of the process started by HAC, Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee. "Based upon our experience in other markets, a newsletter is typically sent out to the community explaining the project background, work underway and next steps in the process. The newsletter typically contains an invitation to residents and owners to attend a public information open house. No such communication or consultation was initiated by HAC.

"Furthermore, the local BIA was not contacted or requested to participate in the process. In our opinion, the lack of inclusion and transparency is troublesome since 15 of the 30 commercial property along the Yonge Street core are recommended to be designated. The HAC recommendations, if approved by Council, will impact business investment, livelihoods and jobs. It is our opinion that instead of working within the active owners and searching for a solution that will benefit all parties, the HAC recommendations will work counter productive to the promenade urban strategy and the general wellbeing of the historic core."

It was unclear, he added, who completed the evaluations of the buildings, nor is it clear what qualifications they have to do so, he claimed. A "qualified heritage professional" is typically hired to do detailed research into each property, someone with specialized knowledge with formal training and work experience. HAC's recommendations, he claimed, did not afford Mr. Soscia the opportunity to hire a heritage professional of his own to look into the merits of which the consultant said he believed there were none.

"In addition, the official plan includes policies that support the preservation of heritage buildings and their integration into new development. Furthermore, urban design guidelines are in place to ensure all new developments or redevelopment are compatible with the character of the downtown core," he continued. "Since purchasing the properties, Mr. Soscia has made significant contributions to removing undesirable uses and replacing spaces with reputable tenants that have contributed to increased traffic and an improved streetscape. Mr. Soscia acknowledges that the Town's expectation is that any new development proposals will require the owner to demonstrate how heritage buildings will be preserved and incorporated into the development plans. Mr. Soscia has also expressed his desire to work with the Town to ensure that any development will support the downtown revitalization plan while respecting the heritage character of the building."

But Council members had a different view.

Councillor Jeff Thom, who chairs HAC, said Mr. Balbinot's claims that the process was anything less than transparent "remarkable" and the process had been followed to the letter. He also said he took issue with Mr. Balbinot "impugning" the motives of HAC members.

The Councillor noted that Council's decision last week triggers a further process that would include published notices of Council's intent to designate the buildings which, in turn, triggers a 30 day window for property owners to get a heritage assessment of their own and appeal the decision.

"Council has given them the authority to make recommendations regarding heritage matters," said Councillor Thom. "This is the process. You might disagree with it, but I don't think you can come up here and say it hasn't been transparent when we have followed the process to the T. I vehemently disagree with your comments as well and I think that the members of HAC don't agree with them either."

This was a view shared by Councillor Paul Pirri as well, who added he "looked forward" to seeing what comments Mr. Soscia's professionals have when the process continues.

"Regardless of the outcome of what your planners come forward with, I have no reason to doubt that any building that takes place or redevelopment that takes place, as you have mentioned, will be respectful of the heritage elements of those buildings. But this is a process we're undertaking and I believe we have done it following all the provincial guidelines and mandates."

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: "I think when we dig a little deeper you will see how high those ratings are. To deem them not

worthy, it is really scary. Our downtown core is Aurora, it is the heart of our Town. That's not to say it can't be developed, but the façade, those buildings, those intricate pieces?whatever we have there is very crucial. It is the heart of our Town.?