

# Proponents working on "Plan B" after Hillary-McIntyre Park is nixed by Council

**By Brock Weir**

Proponents of the Hillary-McIntyre Park might say reports of its death are greatly exaggerated, but the vision was dealt a significant blow this week.

While the original people behind the plan say they are currently working on a "Plan B", which would see Hillary House, along with Readman House and Horton Place, the two properties immediately to the south, become a four acre heritage park, Councillors voted down proceeding with the plan.

Last week, Councillors accepted a recommendation not to proceed with purchasing the Horton Place and Readman House.

Although there was an option to "tie up" the properties pending further studies and having the option to re-sell if those studies came to nothing, Aurora CAO Neil Garbe said they looked at various models to see what could generate revenue on the site, but however they sliced it, adapting Horton Place to anything useful necessitated the demolition of the middle property.

"As we [dug] down, the limitations started appearing and with Horton Place, the maximum revenue we could generate doesn't sustain itself," said Mr. Garbe. "We found that we could generate additional revenues in and around the site [but] we couldn't find an appropriate role for the municipality to be involved with. From my perspective, being an active developer and owner of a retail establishment was not in our core business."

The recommendation was met at the Council table with a mixture of regret, told-you-sos and finger pointing.

For Councillor Abel, it was a vision which was brought forward by individuals "from a grassroots level" which was soon met with controversy. This controversy was regrettable, he said, if it dissuades anyone else from coming forward with ideas.

"I saw this as a great idea as long as it didn't cost the taxpayer and I have been like that since Day 1," said Councillor Abel. "It should be sustainable and anyone who develops that should know that. It has taken a long, arduous route to get to this stage. Although it didn't come to fruition in how the proponents wanted it to, it had a good opportunity and a chance. My only concern is the cost to the taxpayer."

To get to this point, Council budgeted \$25,000 for a feasibility study. According to Mr. Garbe, this full amount has been spent out of Council's contingency funds.

Councillor Sandra Humfries, on the other hand, said moving forward with owning heritage properties such as Horton Place allows the municipality to "protect them, develop them, and evolve them" and she was still looking for an opportunity to implement this in the area in question.

"Purchasing these properties, seeing what we could do to protect them and evolve them is an investment," she said. "I don't see everything we do from a heritage perspective as being revenue-based and I see the community adores the heritage part of our community and understands that sometimes we have to have some expense to honour that. I am a little concerned about what happens next."

For Councillor Evelyn Buck, however, a vocal opponent of any portion of the Hillary-McIntyre Park proposal moving beyond the Council table, it was a matter going around in a complete circle and paying \$25,000 for the trip.

"When this idea was first proposed to Council we made a decision that the proponents should go and do the research, come forward with all the documentation that would convince us this was a valid project for the Town to undertake," she said. "It was the right decision we made then. We have spent a year and \$25,000 of the taxpayers' money and hundreds of hours of staff time to arrive back

at the same position we were in at the beginning.?

At the end of the day, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said he is still supportive of the Hillary-McIntyre plan as an idea and was ?disappointed? in how things turned out.

?I still think it is a great idea, but my concern is, as expressed at the time, still the operating cost of a project like this. It is a long-term operating cost that had never been addressed. We spoke with a couple of developers, just as favours to us and one of them came forward with a plan as to how you can commercialize the area and I want to thank them for the work they did. They showed how it could be commercialized and made a go of.?

He was also sharply critical for the ?intransigence? on the part of the Ontario Heritage Trust for not stepping up to support the vision moving forward by shouldering the responsibility of maintaining Hillary House.

?Hillary House is a national treasure and is something that we should be doing that is, quite frankly, extremely expensive,? he said. ?I think we need some additional help to do that and the intransigence is very frustrating.?