

Public meeting on Heritage District set for April 23

By Brock Weir

After a raucous meeting last week, during which residents in the southeast quadrant of Aurora overwhelmingly opposed their neighbourhood being turned into a Heritage Conservation District, those behind the plan are starting to address the concerns head on.

Heritage Advisory Committee member Erina Kelly, who is chair of the Committee's sub-group planning the Southeast Aurora Heritage Conservation District (HCD), roughly bordered by the north side of Wellington Street East in the north, the GO railway tracks at its most easterly point, Rotary Park at its most southerly point, and the eastern side of Victoria Street at its western edge, addressed Council this week to voice her support of Council's moving forward with the plan.

There, April 23 was confirmed as the date the proposed HCD plan would be coming forward to a Public Planning meeting. The session will give residents on both sides of the debate a chance to voice their concerns before Council ultimately decides whether or not to move ahead with the second phase of the study. The April 23 meeting will take place at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers.

Meanwhile, Heritage Consultant Carl Bray has been in communication with residents and property owners in the area to address some of the concerns levelled at the podium earlier this month, including property rights and improvements.

Topping his list was the argument put forward by multiple delegates that making this neighbourhood a Heritage Conservation District (HCD) would, in some way, make the Town of Aurora a co-owner of the properties.

'The municipality is not co-owner of your property under designation,' noted Mr. Bray.

At the meeting, property owners such as Gavin Newell and realtor Lynn Knowles also voiced their concerns over insurance costs and mortgage premiums that could be affected by the institution of an HCD. Property owners, for instance, would have to have their properties professionally appraised and updated every three years for insurance purposes, which would likely result in increased deductibles, he argued.

In his letter, Mr. Bray countered that designation in and of itself is not what will cause a hit in insurance, but the standard risks of owning an older property ranging from old wiring to outmoded heating systems.

'Designation shouldn't affect [mortgage] eligibility,' he said. 'Since property values generally are stabilized or increase following designation, eligibility should be easier to obtain because of the reduced risk of mortgaging a property in an area where damage is more closely managed.'

'District designation allows the Town to regulate damage that could adversely affect the identified heritage character of the district. Significant changes require a heritage permit, but they would also usually require a building permit or even amendments to the zoning or Official Plan. For the majority of changes occurring in a district, the degree of so-called 'interference' is minor and no more than would be expected in the normal land use planning process.'

Normal maintenance of properties, he cautioned, would not be affected by a heritage district designation, and would be applicable to guidelines handed down from the Province of Ontario. Alterations, however, could be a different story.

'Significant alterations, new construction or demolition require a permit and may also entail scrutiny by the [Heritage Advisory Committee] (HAC) and Council approval,' he said. 'Minor alterations normally do not require a permit. Again, the focus on the HCD is on the general appearance of the streetscape to ensure that the heritage character of the area is conserved and enhanced. For individual properties, the Plan affects what can be seen from the public street, which means that changes can occur to the rear and, in some cases, to the sides of the buildings without affecting the area's heritage character and without requiring a heritage permit.'

To the all-important question of property values, Mr. Bray says potential sale price of properties will stay the same or increase, despite a delegation to the contrary by Ms. Knowles.

?Studies in Ontario by the University of Waterloo and in the US by the Brookings Institute show conclusively that property values either stay the same or increase in HCDs, relative to comparable properties in areas not designated.?

At the end of the day, however, Mr. Bray notes it is technically possible for property owners to ?opt out? of a district by rejigging boundaries, but said this could result in a ?Swiss cheese effect? which could raise issues between a non-designated property and its owner over their next door neighbour whose property could be within the limits.

?After designation, and practically speaking, the designation is binding,? said Mr. Bray. ?However, the municipality always has the option of reviewing the District designation periodically and can amend the designating bylaw to alter the District boundary after that review.?