

Public Planning meeting set for April 23 on Southeast Heritage Conservation District

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents on both sides of the debate surrounding the proposed Southeast Aurora Heritage Conservation District will have a chance to sound off and state their case this April.

Councillors have earmarked Wednesday, April 23 for a public planning meeting to discuss moving onto the next phase in the Heritage Conservation District (HCD) study.

The HCD covers the southeast quadrant of Yonge and Wellington from Wellington Street in the north, to the just beyond the GO Tracks on its most easterly boundary, to Rotary Park in its extreme south, and Victoria Street in the west.

It is proposed to encompass a wide range of homes and amenities, including Town Park, the old Aurora Armoury, and the former Wells Street Public School, which is due to commence its transformation into lofts this year.

Residents came forward earlier this month to speak out against the HCD, and many members took the opportunity last week to express their support for a formal public planning meeting.

"We are grateful that Council voted unanimously to hold the public planning meeting," said realtor Lynn Knowles last week, after her delegation to Council earlier this month speaking out against the plan, citing a possible decrease in property values and restrictions on property owners should the plan go through.

Ms. Knowles was followed by area resident Erina Kelly, who is a member of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee and one of the leading proponents of the HCD. She said many residents left the March 4 General Committee meeting "annoyed and confused" by some of the arguments made against the HCD. In response, she said proponents of the plan have set up a "network" to communicate "factual information" to the residents of the area.

"No matter where you live in Aurora, the planning department has a say in what you do in your home," said Ms. Kelly, countering arguments that the HCD would put undue restrictions on property owners. "Building and demolition permits protect the interests of both individuals and the community as a whole. Does this translate into the Town owning half your house? Only if you choose to share half of your capital gains when you sell.

"It is the word 'heritage' that gets blood pressure rising and that is where the spin begins. I am hoping it will end in clear dialogue if this process continues."

Citing a 1999 study from the University of Waterloo, HCDs typically stabilize or increase property values, she said. Unionville, she added, is a prime example of a community that has both preserved and promoted its heritage in a way to increase "economic vitality."

"All we have to do is observe," she said. "I believe people are engaged in a confusing debate with too many unanswered questions. An open forum will help us determine if there is enough common ground to enter phase two."

Ms. Kelly was supported at the podium by realtor Linda Stephens. As a life-long Aurora resident, she said she views the area in question as the "heart" of Aurora, and something that should be "treasured". In her experience, she said, the designation of an HCD would only go to help property values.

"The province has over 100 distinct heritage districts that we could learn from and should look into for how to work with the Heritage District to preserve what is in the heart of our Town," said Ms. Stephens.

For Councillors, next month's Public Planning meeting will be a chance for all sides to air what is on their minds and provide a forum where, in the words of Councillor John Abel, "we can agree on facts that are presented."

"Community engagement is fundamental to the process and I am supportive of having some additional public meetings if that will help inform and engage the residents and make sure everyone is informed and aware of the policies and where the impact is," added Councillor Michael Thompson.

"We went through the process with the Northeast District and I felt the communication plan laid out in 2006 was much more extensive than now. While I think the public planning meeting is a first step, I hope we look back to what was done in 2006 and entertain some additional ways in which residents in that area are properly informed and engaged in this process and I think there is more that we can do."

Councillor Wendy Gaertner also expressed support of the public meeting both for the benefit of residents and of Council.

"Council needs to have all the information it can from as many residents as possible in order to make an informed decision," she said.