

Rebuilding fund established for Aurora United Church



By Brock Weir

Demolition crews are expected to continue dismantling portions of the nearly 140-year-old Aurora United Church after a devastating fire reduced the historic landmark to mere ruins on Friday.

Although crews and church leaders are hopeful portions of the Yonge Street façade can be saved, the north, south, and west walls had to come down by Tuesday afternoon.

As work continues, those involved have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of support from the community, regardless of religion. The 'Aurora United Church Rebuilding Fund' has been established to provide a way for people to help.

Donations can be made to Bank of Montreal Account number 03038976766.

By Saturday, Central York Fire Services (CYFS) deemed the blaze accidental caused by roofers who had been repairing a leaky roof on the north addition to the building, work which carried on throughout the preceding week.

'The roofers were using an open flame, part of the roofing process, and started a small fire they thought they had extinguished,' said Deputy Chief Paul Leslie. 'By the time they realised they had not, it was too late to extinguish it.'

By Saturday, the CYFS decided they had the fire out, but crews from Priestly Demolition were on hand doing limited demolition work, clearing rubble trying to get to the basement. The crews are due to conduct an exploration of the structural stability of what is left standing before deciding the next steps.

Aurora United Church has been the spiritual home of over seven generations of Aurora residents.

Volunteers began arriving at the church on Friday morning to prepare for Palm Sunday services, while children played in the on-site day care centre when the blaze broke out on the roof.

The alarm was sounded with a call to 9-1-1 at approximately 10.25 a.m. with reports of a structural fire. When the CYFS, York Regional Police, and York Region EMS arrived on the scene, smoke was visible coming from the roof, but the fire soon began to rage.

Eventually, it became clear to Chief Leslie that despite an aggressive attempt to knock the fire down, they weren't able to get a leg up on it.

The fire spread up inside the roof space and that is very difficult to access in a church structure, he said. The fact the roof was sheathed in steel also meant it was very difficult for us to access from the outside through the roof cover.

Business owners, area residents, and students on their lunch breaks gathered in alleys along Yonge Street, and lined Tyler Street and Temperance Street to watch the landmark, for some, their life-long place of worship, burn. Spectators were eventually moved off Tyler Street once it became engulfed in black smoke.

By the early afternoon, it was clear the fire crews were fighting a losing battle against the blaze.

We had to pull our crews back as a result of deteriorating conditions with the fire. Eventually the fire worked its way through the roof, said Leslie, noting they then had to deploy their aerial streams of water directly onto the church roof. The nature and the types of these fires was such it was very difficult to get to the scene of the fire with the roof structure still in place. It is a conundrum because you can't get at it from inside and you can't get at it from the outside until the roof starts to give way. When the roof at the rear started to collapse, that exposed the rear side and we were able to put it out quickly.

Once the rear roof started to collapse, we were actually able to get into the scene of the fire with our hose streams and did a very effective job of knocking the fire back down. Unfortunately, the fire progressed through to the main roof of the church and as that started up to the main interior, it fuelled the fire more and it started to build across the front of the church as well.

Nearly 70 firefighters were on the scene to fight the blaze, not only from the CYFS, but also crews from King Township, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury, and Vaughan. Additional crews were also brought in from Georgina and Markham to help cover the rest of the area normally serviced by the CYFS.

York Regional Police and EMS were at the scene from the start, also helping to direct traffic after Yonge Street was closed from Wellington Street to Kennedy.

Several surrounding businesses were closed, and six homes were evacuated.

One resident was treated for respiratory problems, and two firefighters were taken to Southlake for observation after receiving minor injuries with irritants.

The Aurora Public Library was also closed due to the fire, as was the Aurora Cultural Centre, which cancelled the rest of the day's programming, including a concert.

The CYFS and York Regional Police completed their investigation into the cause of the fire on Saturday. Good witness statements taken early on helped them zero in quickly on the cause, added Leslie.