

Remnants of Sisman Shoe factory to receive heritage designation

There are few reminders in the community of the Sisman Shoe Company, one of Aurora's most important early industries.

The factory employed hundreds of Aurorans and, as a key supplier during the First World War, outfitted hundreds more men who went overseas for King and Country.

Long since closed, remnants of the Sisman business can be found underneath beige stucco on the west side of Berczy Street and one of the factory buildings could be preserved for generations to come as Council eyes formal designation under the Ontario Heritage Act.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, tentatively approved the heritage designation of 34 Berczy Street.

The designation comes as developers look to build an eight-storey mixed use building on the area just steps from the Aurora GO station.

“34 Berczy Street contains a two-storey building which was formerly part of the Sisman Shoe Factory,” said Heritage Planner Brashanthe Manoharan in a report to Council. “The original brick building underwent an extensive renovation and was converted from a single-use industrial factory to a multi-unit building.”

The building was originally constructed in 1901 and a year later, the plant employed nearly 100 people and produced 600 pairs of shoes daily.

A recent evaluation by a group struck by the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee scored 34 Berczy as 85/100 in an evaluation of heritage assets, a high score compared to several other surviving Sisman properties on the street. While Council voted to designate 34 last week, votes to do the same with 26, 32, and 38 Berczy Street failed.

“In regards to 34 & 38 Berczy Street, although the property has historical value because of its direct association with Sisman Shoe Factory, the heritage integrity is such that it may not be worthy of designation,” said Manoharan. “At one time, the tall chimney stack and the boiler room were important attributes that truly signalled the industrial character of the Sisman Shoe Factory Complex.

“However, these attributes were completely demolished, possibly during the renovation in the 1980s. Further, the original stone and brick construction has been covered with cream-coloured stucco, which have a significant impact on its character.”

But Council saw value retaining 34 Berczy, suggesting the building be incorporated into whatever is ultimately built on the site. While the rest of the proposed buildings could meet the wrecking ball, Council also called for a complete documentation of 38 Berczy Street for the historical record.

“It seems clear to me that these buildings have a very emotional and sentimental attachment to residents because history is history,” said Councillor Harold Kim. “Stories have been told of a location or a physical building for decades and generations, so I understand the difficult decision that this is. I don't think any of these are of heritage value from a traditional perspective, but I am open to having 34 be designated.”

Councillor Sandra Humfries, who sits on the Heritage Advisory Committee, however, had a different perspective, stating that all the buildings in question were worthy of heritage designation. Her motion to designate the whole parcel of land, however, failed to gain traction around the table.

Much of last week's discussion focused on the timing of the designation.

Full designation was something the Heritage Committee voted for in 2020, but a final recommendation to lawmakers to follow through on it didn't reach the Council table.

"HAC and myself included did rate these buildings back then based on the old [heritage] criteria and we felt they were designation-worthy," said Councillor Humfries. "From a HAC perspective, they would like me to state that this should have been done two years ago and that's why we're here, based on the old criteria."

Councillor Wendy Gaertner also expressed some disappointment it had taken so long to get to this point.

"I remember being very upset when this came to Public Planning because the developer said nothing was worthy of [designation] and my understanding was that 34 was definitely worthy of designation," she said. "I was very clear that 34 was a prime candidate for designation. There were many problems with the other buildings [including] their state of disrepair and how they have been changed. I just can't understand this."

At the end of the discussion, Mayor Tom Mrakas said he wished the matter had been dealt with in 2020.

"I do agree with some of the comments around the table with regards to the ones that are in Group 2," he said of the properties surrounding 34 Berczy. "I don't see them worthy of designation and I wish we did deal with it in 2020 because that is the decision I would have made in 2020. I think as a Council we need to look at what [decision we would have made back then] and not try to confuse it or conflate it with the development application we saw come before us and say, whether we agree or disagree with the application, now what do we want to do from a heritage perspective."

"By us moving forward down this path where we look at just 34, I think that speaks to exactly what we as a Council and what our community is looking for in that area: to make sure we respect the heritage while we continue to grow in a positive fashion."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter