

Study for \$10m Heritage Park gains support

By Brock Weir

It started life as a \$10 million idea that involved into a \$10 million plan, but Hillary-McIntyre Park, the proposed four acre heritage park just north of Aurora's Downtown Core could soon have some extra clout.

Council approved last week laying the groundwork for a possible feasibility study to determine the next steps in making the heritage park a reality. The plan consists of three Yonge Street buildings - the historic Hillary House and Horton Place at Yonge and Irwin Avenue, and the Readman House sandwiched between the two.

Proponents of the plan envision compassing the three buildings into a heritage park with the middle house expanded to include a permanent home of the Aurora Collection, the future Aurora Sport Hall of Fame, and a revenue generating conference centre.

"The grounds are an untapped resource," said Bill Albino, Chair of the Hillary-McIntyre Park Committee. "You have 4.8 acres in the middle of Town which will end up being an asset for people to use forever. It will build Aurora's identity and personality. It will preserve some invaluable historic assets which today define our Town and are unique [assets]. It will restore Downtown Aurora as a destination and a place to go and a place to be, and will showcase the hidden treasures. We believe it will put Aurora back on the map [and will be] a legacy that Aurorans will enjoy all through their lives and will make a huge difference to Aurora as a place to live."

The proponents of the plan came forward to Council last week to make their pitch in support of a motion from Councillor John Abel, calling on staff to look at the possibility of undertaking a feasibility study on the proposal. They said a feasibility study would look not only at the land issues that could crop up, but steer it in a direction that would ensure it fit into various Town projects already ongoing, or in the works, including the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, the Downtown Revitalization Plan, and the future Cultural Master Plan.

It would also take a closer look at costs, and contributions from stakeholders and other possible investors.

The people behind the plan estimate when all is said and done, (including the transfer of Hillary House, the purchase of Horton Place at reduced market value from local historian John McIntyre, and the market value sale of Readman House from a local realtor) the project will clock in at approximately \$10 million, including the renovations and additions. Half, they hope, will come from the Town's Hydro Reserve Account with the remainder coming from Federal, Provincial and private grants, as well as private fundraising.

Councillors approved taking the next step on the road to a feasibility study 7 ? 2 with Councillors Evelyn Buck and Wendy Gaertner voting against the plan.

The former said she viewed what was before Council as little more than a real estate deal.

"I was particularly underwhelmed by your proposal," Councillor Buck told Mr. Albino. "All I see here is a high pitch sale of two real estate properties and all I see here is an attempt to sell two properties to the Town and nothing else."

Councillor Sandra Humfries, however, spoke in favour of Councillor Abel's motion.

"This group has come forward with a vision and a plan," she said. "One thing that struck me in the presentation was keeping the buildings true and there in perpetuity. Those sites are able to be developed in any which direction, so this is an opportunity for us to investigate and see through our strategic direction if this is something we would like to consider."

"This is not asking to go forward with a study. It is asking staff to review the vision before the Town and if this is something we

would like to consider, if it fits within the strategies of our Town.?

Looking at the wider picture appeared to be foremost in Councillors minds. Although he said he would have preferred more of an indication that Council was keen on supporting the multi-million dollar project before he tasked staff with coming up with a feasibility study for the feasibility study, Councillor John Gallo said it would answer many questions.

?I don't know where I sit because I am a little bit concerned about putting the cart before the horse and whether or not I support a study with a price tag of whatever it is. Do I support the bigger picture? Maybe I will. Maybe the report will tell me, yes, this will pay for itself, and the funding model is excellent, but I struggle with whether or not I want to move forward to get that study because I don't know if I support the bigger picture.?

Warming to her theme, however, Councillor Buck questioned whether the proponents of the plan, and individual Councillors would be supportive of what is on the table if the money earned from the sale of Aurora Hydro was not available as a funding source.

?If we didn't have the hydro fund, would you seriously consider borrowing millions of dollars to even consider this idea?? she asked.

Mayor Dawe, however, said she couldn't have it both ways.

?Let's assume [this is a play for the Hydro Money] and I don't buy that for a minute,? he said. ?It was this Council that put out the request to the public [asking] how you would like to use the \$33 million we have in the piggy bank. You, Councillor Buck, brought that forward [asking] how we should use this money.

?If this was strictly a play from these folks for the Hydro money, they gave us exactly what they wanted, so we should be thanking them because they actually did a heck of a lot of work, more than someone coming in and saying let's just reduce taxes.

?We have a group of engaged citizens who have brought forward a terrific project to town. At the very least, we should say thank you for doing that work. We're now going to take a very serious look of where we want to go if we want to do it. Let's not be criticising people for bringing forward ideas.?