

Study to lay groundwork for "heritage landscapes"

By Brock Weir

Wide vistas and approaches to well-known historic landmarks can evoke powerful memories and feelings for people who hold them dear ? and these landscapes could become protected in Aurora following a Council decision last week.

In an 8 ? 1 vote, Council voted in favour of a motion put forward by Councillor Tom Mrakas to begin building an inventory of what he calls ?cultural heritage landscapes.?

These landscapes ? which could range from parkland and open spaces to streetscapes, cemeteries and even golf courses ? are an extension of protections already in place for ?significant built heritage? and a move to protect landscapes could be an opportunity to ?encourage good stewardship? of identified lands and structures around the community.

The motion calls on a full assessment and inventory of such landscapes to be incorporated into Aurora's Official Plan Review, and the compiled inventory sent to the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee in September prior to Council review.

Although some Councillors said they had concerns about what such an inventory could mean to homes and buildings already designated for their heritage value, as well the owners of such buildings that could be up for future designation, they welcomed an inventory.

?In Aurora, I think we pride ourselves when it comes to heritage,? said Councillor Mrakas. ?As a municipality, I think we have done an excellent job in preserving and protecting our building structures, but when it comes to history, it is not just about buildings; it is about places where people gather, where people play, and where they have grown together in a community.

?We need to know the past in order to be able to move forward. We need to protect and preserve not just the built structures. We need to protect landscapes that have special meaning to the residents of the Town. I am saddened at the thought we may have missed opportunities to preserve such cultural landscapes that are important to this Town. I think I we do not address the lack of policy now we may [lose] others forever.?

?Lost opportunity? is key when considering the motion, said Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who said it is important to investigate opportunities that are out there ? and there are quite a few, she contended.

?I was very glad to see this motion,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?I think it is something that makes sense. It is something that has been lacking. I look forward to it coming to the Heritage Committee and I think they are going to be pretty excited about this.?

And they will be, agreed Councillor Jeff Thom, who chairs the Committee.

?Just as we protect our heritage structure, our landscapes should be protected as well for future generations,? he said.

As Aurora looks towards intensification, it is important for these landscapes to be documented now, agreed Councillor John Abel. His enthusiasm for the motion, however, was tempered looking back at some of the community uproar that took place last year over studies to designate the southeast quadrant of Yonge and Wellington into the Town's second heritage conservation district.

He sought assurances from Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, that the same issues would not crop up in any future talks when it comes to designation and restrictions property owners might face to their properties if they lie within a future designated landscape.

Those options will be considered in the future, said Mr. Ramunno, noting an inventory of what's available is just the first step. ?I just want to make sure we don't have a rebellion,? said Councillor Abel.

Councillor Paul Pirri, who was ultimately the lone vote cast against the motion, shared these concerns.

“The landscape has changed an immense deal with the 2Bs and 2Cs in Town,” he said. “I look forward to seeing how much more there is to preserve. I think it is very easy for us, as a municipality, to designate our own properties and our own assets, a lot of the roadway, the way the roads work, a lot of our parks, our trail system, and the national historic site in Town. I think it would all make sense, but it would be interesting for me to see how private residential owners react to being put on this list.”

For Mayor Dawe, however, that was a topic for another day.

“Your point is well made, but I don't think we're at that stage yet,” said Mayor Dawe. “[But], quite frankly, I agree with most of your points.”