

Tempers flare over plan to demolish heritage house

By Brock Weir

Tempers flared around the Council table last week when developers came forward looking for permission to demolish a heritage-designated home in southeast Aurora that has been found to contain asbestos.

Historically known as the Alan Brown House, the building in question is now located at 158 Carisbrooke Circle near Bayview Avenue and Vondorf Road, having been moved to its present foundation to make room for the area's new housing development.

The initial plan was for the house to be renovated, including the construction of a new addition, for future sale to new homeowners. This was the plan approved by Council; however, problems with the building have since surfaced, according to Mark Hall, who appeared before Councillors last week representing the developer.

“Fairly recently, in February, Fernbrook [Homes] noticed cracks in the exterior of the brick-bearing walls of the house,” he said, reiterating many of the comments he and his group made to Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee earlier this month. “In testing the property, it was discovered the stucco on the exterior, in fact, has asbestos in it and there is asbestos within the plaster on the interior. There is mould in the building and a combination of those issues make it complicated to sell this to a new owner with those conditions.”

While he said they now proposed building a replica of the house, which has been standing largely open to the elements for several years now, in new and modern building materials, the suggestion was not greeted with open arms by Council.

Mr. Hall brought these concerns to the Heritage Committee on June 13, asking them to recommend a demolition to Council. They voted to take the time allowed them by legislation to carry out a review. But, in the meantime, the applicants came to Town Hall on June 17 to apply for a demolition permit, not keen to wait for a decision.

This sparked an impassioned response from Councillor Sandra Humfries, who expressed anger at what she said she believed to be a group trying to circumvent the process.

“There is a process and a Committee that reviews the house as it stands and there is an opinion brought back and Council makes a decision,” she said. “We haven't even got there yet. This house has been sitting there for five years and now they're going to demolish it. We have to respect the process and we have to respect our heritage and I am not in any way, shape or form even going to consider what is being discussed right now! I will not do it and I feel it is absolutely disrespecting our whole process and our policies here!”

“Yes, they have the right to demolish it and we have 90 days to respond. There is no hurry and I will not push that process. I want the right things to be done and followed and then we will get back to the developer and they can tear the damned thing down! I am really beyond disappointed here. You know what? Let's get back to basics here: this is our town! I should just shut up, but the bottom line is I want the process followed. If it is going to be torn down, it is going to be torn down properly because the Committee is going to have a chance to review it and there is no way to salvage it. Asbestos can be cleared.”

Mayor Geoff Dawe initially put forward an amendment to the Heritage Committee's recommendations to pave the way for the demolition, stating “if this house was at Yonge and Wellington I never would have considered this” but the house, in his view, was not located in an area that was “heritage significant” to Aurora. However, as more information about the process came forward, he changed his mind and withdrew the amendment.

“I find it a little disingenuous that we would have a presentation at the Heritage meeting and a presentation here and, in the interim, a demolition permit was put in place that I don't know about,” he said. “I wouldn't support my own amendment if it came to a vote.”

This was the sentiment expressed around the table, including from Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who serves on the Heritage Committee.

?Like [Councillor Humfries] said, there are no words, folks,? said Councillor Gaertner. ?We have to respect our process, we have to respect our heritage, we have to respect our residents.?

Councillor Paul Pirri agreed, adding: ?I don't think there would have been enough information in front of me to make a decision one way or another, although I don't think asbestos is a reason why a building should be demolished. There are definitely work arounds and I would feel comfortable moving into a home that has had asbestos removed in a safe and appropriate manner.?