

Tough love for owners of vacant and derelict buildings could spur renewal: Council

By Brock Weir

It's time to get tough on absentee landlords who are sitting on vacant buildings going steadily downhill, according to Council. Council last week approved laying the groundwork for a new bylaw which could put stiffer regulations on landowners to keep their properties up, in the interests of getting new businesses into the space and stimulate downtown renewal.

The result of a motion from Councillor Tom Mrakas, it is intended to give some more 'teeth' to Aurora's existing building bylaws. 'This is about giving staff the tools required to look at how our buildings, especially in our Downtown Core and how we can encourage absentee landlords to give them a push [to keep their properties up] so they are not another eyesore on the Downtown Core, or to help promote them and get them leased, so they are not a blight on the Town,' said Councillor Mrakas, noting other municipalities such as Hamilton have vacant and derelict building bylaws to regenerate growth.

'I was walking down [Yonge Street] a couple of weeks ago and meeting some of the business owners, and some of the buildings are in rough shape, vacant, and need to be pushed to be reopened. A lot of times, the way I look at absentee landlords is they all have a mortgage on them right now so they have no problems with sitting on it and allowing them to sit there. They are in no rush to sell it but I think it is our job to ensure within the Town we have ways to make everything look good. We take pride in our Town and I think this helps.'

While Council members asked for more information on what other municipalities are doing to combat this issue, they largely agreed it was time for something to be done. Citing numerous examples of heritage buildings over the last decade that have had to be knocked down due to neglect and being beyond the point of repair; or, in the words of Councillor Mrakas, 'demolition by decay.' 'Given the number of derelict buildings we do have, and we don't have as many as other municipalities, it is our responsibility to keep all of our properties safe and nice,' said Councillor Harold Kim. 'I think any motion to enhance or create that gives staff and the Town more authority, and more teeth, is welcome.'

For Councillor Paul Pirri, however, a distinction needs to be made between a derelict and a vacant building. They are not always one in the same and, adding a dimension to any draft bylaw that might come forward, is the issue of vacant homes.

'There is speculation going around in the housing market and there is talk going around on imposing a tax on people who have vacant homes that are sitting empty and might be clean on the outside,' said Councillor Pirri. 'There has been conversations from a real estate perspective about imposing a tax and I have heard a 1.5 per cent of value per year. I just wanted to make sure we were looking at this from all perspectives and what kind of bylaw we would be getting back.'

Councillor John Abel was on a similar wavelength. Supporting the motion at hand, he cited one he put forward last year on vacant buildings in Town which would have put an escalating tax on landowners.

'Their tax would be increased and the longer [the buildings were in limbo] the more the tax would go up,' he said. '[Town Treasurer] Dan Elliott did his investigations and told me that enforcing a bylaw of this nature would not be allowed.'

'Nothing grabs the attention of a landlord than when he starts having to pay more money. We're trying to draw the attention of the landowner that leaving a building in a derelict or unkempt way is not acceptable by our own property standards, nor is it reflective of our community, nor is it reflective of our strategy to attract and retain businesses.'

Currently, the Town of Aurora has provisions relating to vacant buildings that kick in after 90 days including the disconnection of services and the boarding of windows. There are additional provisions for heritage buildings. Components of the Building Code Act allow the municipality to do work on and place a lien on unsafe properties.

Going further with this notice of motion will likely be conditional on provisions currently set out under the Province's Municipal Act.