

Town could prove a lifeline for Hillary House National Historic Site



Hillary House has served the community in many ways in its nearly 165-year history. Now the community could be lifeline for the landmark, Aurora's only National Historic Site, as it looks to the future.

2025 could prove to be a pivotal year for the 1862 doctor's office and home, which is currently owned and maintained by the Aurora Historical Society (AHS), with support from the Town.

The future of Hillary House was a focus for Council in 2024 as the AHS approached the Town on ways they could collaborate further to ensure the museum's future ? including the possible transfer of ownership to the municipality.

?The conversations have been happening internally for a while now and it (the financial need) has been pretty apparent when we present our budget yearly at Town Hall and we're operating in the red,? says former Aurora mayor Geoff Dawe, who serves as co-president of the AHS, noting their financial situation fluctuates from year to year.

In 2023, the AHS, with help from the Town, commissioned an Enhanced Condition Assessment Report, which highlighted a number of physical issues. The report came on the heels of a \$100,000 effort to restore Hillary House's landmark porch, one of the architectural features that helped secure its place as a National Historic Site. It found that \$1.2 million would be needed over the next 10 years to address much-needed repairs.

?We would need to raise \$100,000 a year over and above any kind of operating expense to start to carry out the proper repairs,? says Dawe. ?It's an incredibly daunting task to raise the amount of funds that are needed to do what we would consider a proper job in terms of? not even necessarily restoring Hillary House, but at least bring it up to some kind of reasonable level as to where it should be just in terms of safety and future stability. One of the elements the Enhanced Report was an expenditure of, I believe, \$30,000 and that was simply to fund excavating part of the foundation to see what might need to be done.?

While Hillary House and the AHS receive some support in the municipal budget this year, their designation as a National Historic Site makes them eligible for project-based grants through Parks Canada, but only to 50 per cent costs, according to AHS Curator Kathleen Vahey.

As talks continue, it's unclear just what the recommended course of action would be for further collaboration with the Town. One option offered by Dawe is an agreement between the two parties, similar to one inked by the AHS and the Town in the early 2000s

which saw the Society transfer ownership of the Church Street School to the municipality. Another option could be further funding to help them bring on an individual dedicated to maximizing the grant-writing process.

While multiple avenues are being explored, Dawe and Vahey agree that the value of Hillary House to the community has been regularly demonstrated.

‘It’s an anchor of heritage and history in the community,’ says Vahey. ‘Hillary House has been a part of Aurora since 1862 and I think it has been a staple to the Town. Its position is so unique to tell the historical story and be that kind of step back in time. It is the intention of the AHS to ensure that it is there for future generations, as we have in the 40 years since we’ve owned it.’

Adds Dawe, who served as Mayor between 2010 and 2018: ‘When I was in office, one of the goals I wanted to see achieved was the concept of Aurora as a complete community. Part of that is how do you develop tourism? We had in just the last year or so, people who were visiting Canada – one set from Russia and one set from Indonesia – who specifically came to visit Hillary House. I see that as a tourist attraction, as part of building Aurora, especially in the downtown core.

‘With the intensification that is going on and will go on downtown on Yonge Street, the big one with the United Church rebuild, Hillary House being roughly two acres creates a respite within a potential sea of concrete.’

By Brock Weir