

Historic commercial block receives heritage designation

Buildings that have defined Aurora's business and commercial heritage for more than a century have received an extra layer of protection.

Council last week unanimously voted to designate 15 Yonge Street buildings between Wellington and Church Streets as being of cultural heritage value or interest.

Buildings impacted by the designation include the Yonge Street addresses of 15195 (Imperial Bank), 15199 (Grimshaw Baker), 15203 (Butcher Building), 15210 (Andrews Block), 15216 (Odd Fellows Block), 15218 and 15220 (Clift Building), 15221 (Sterling Bank), 15222, 15224, and 15226 (The Faughner Building), 15225 (Winter's Baker), 15229 (The Willis Building), 15223 (Medical Hall), 15240 (The Ashton Building), 15242 (The Lloyd Building), 15243A (Machell Property), and 152438 (Whimster's Store).

"I am proud of this Council which just designated 15 properties in our Downtown Core and I think that is fabulous," said Mayor Tom Mrakas at the end of the meeting. "Bravo. We have been looking to do that for a long time and we have done that today."

Council's approval of the heritage designation came with little fanfare around the table, but getting this protection in place has been the subject of a long process.

While the Town has always been in favour of moving forward with the designation, seeing it as an attempt to preserve the Victorian storefronts on what has traditionally been Aurora's main street, some property owners filed objections to the plan.

These objections triggered a separate process that referred the matter to the Province's Conservation Review Board to review whether or not the properties in question did indeed have cultural heritage value. The Board, however, is a non-binding body and the ultimate decision was up to local lawmakers.

The Council of the day was also in favour of moving forward with the designation, but then-mayor Geoff Dawe had reservations.

"My concern with this is that we have not engaged the owners at this point," he said. "We're looking at substantial changes to the status of their buildings and I think it would be appropriate to engage the owners. My suggestion is what we did with [the Hallmark lands] is refer that back to the Heritage Advisory Committee with a request they engage the owners so they can have a robust discussion [with them] at Committee and then come back to us as well."

Then-councillor Jeff Thom offered a different viewpoint, adding "Consultation will not change the facts. These buildings are historical, they are important [not only to] the character of our main street, but I think the character of our Town as a whole. No amount of consultation will change their importance. In my mind, these buildings, regardless of whether the owners are for designation or are not in favour, are worthy of designation, worthy of protection."

By Brock Weir Editor/Local Journalism Initiative Reporter