

Councillors unconvinced about viability of Heritage Park plan

By Brock Weir

Councillors will have a second chance to sound off on negotiating the sale of three historic and century homes on Yonge Street this week before final approval.

For Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and at least three Councillors, it will be another opportunity to share their concerns about the plan before Council ultimately gives the green light to what could potentially be a \$10 million deal for the three properties.

After pitches from consultants and proponents of the plan, some members of Council remained unconvinced this was an opportunity Aurora couldn't afford to pass up and cited concerns not only with costs, but also the practicality of the plan before them – particularly when it has yet to be determined just what the final uses of these buildings might be in the future.

"I don't necessarily believe this project has the viability in my mind to continue to move forward," said Councillor Paul Pirri of the proposal. "Maybe land speculation isn't the right term, but we buy the properties now without necessarily knowing what you're going to do with them, I don't think that is the business of the municipality."

Although Councillors voicing their support for giving the okay to begin negotiations with the owners of the three properties (the Aurora Historical Society owns Hillary House, realtor Bruce Spragg the Readman House, and historian John McIntyre Horton Place) in order to have a clearer view of both a final price tag for the deal and potential governmental and private sector support, others weren't quite as convinced this would just be one step.

"There are definitely some issues in the closed session report I definitely think need to be addressed by members of Council in terms of our own due diligence, so we will have that conversation at another time," said Councillor Michael Thompson, noting he wanted some reassurances of what grants would be available in the future to help offset the cost of the plan. "One of the concerns about moving forward and doing this without going through the grant process is we're leaving money on the table. We are essentially shortchanging the taxpayers."

"This is all about public, private partnerships and bringing those people in to the fold and making sure we can capitalize on every dollar that is available. Moving forward, we are losing that opportunity to leverage a site that has both national and provincial associations to garner additional money to reduce the costs to Aurora taxpayers."

From the perspective of municipal staff, however, before that idea can be more fully explored, Aurora Council needs to either commit to the properties or have firm intentions on what they plan to do with them. Without the lands being in municipal hands, Federal and Provincial agencies are less likely to come to the table.

"There has been lots of discussions with regards to partnerships, so we can continue to have those discussions," said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation. "With regards to private and public opportunities, we have had those in other facilities but those were Town-owned. It's a challenge when we're looking for partners on a piece of property we don't presently own."

Whether or not the funding is there, or whether or not the partners are there, the plan itself – as presented – was missing one very vital piece for Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

"I would like to see these three heritage properties protected and I think the majority of people in this chamber would like to see that," she said. "I don't see anywhere in this report that says this would be a viable heritage park. I know that the consultants weren't taking a feasibility analysis of one particular vision or another, [but] I don't see in the opportunities anything about a heritage park and I think we're going about this backwards."

"We need to have an analysis of the feasibility study and we have to have a plan of what we're going to do with this land because it

will not come cheaply to the taxpayers and there will be more costs added onto that. Chicken or the egg, I think a study or a plan needs to come first.?