

Design panel to keep close eye on Aurora's heritage neighbourhoods

By Brock Weir

Residents coming to Council to sound off on new developments and builds in established communities are frequent sights at Town Hall, but a new Design Review Panel could be the first step in easing some of these concerns down the road.

Council approved the establishment of a Design Review Panel (DRP) last week following a motion from Councillor Tom Mrakas. In his motion, Councillor Mrakas said a DRP is "based on professional judgement, understanding of good design principles, conformance with the Town's Official Plan and other related documents [such as] design guidelines and secondary plans."

Full terms of reference still need to be approved by Council and appointments made before the panel is up and running, but its focus will be on the Aurora Promenade area, which covers portions of Yonge Street and Wellington Street, heritage areas, and any designated or listed properties.

"I think this is something we should move forward with," said Councillor Mrakas. "It helps us have that objective, professional view where experts can come in and look at the policy we have created and use that to give advice to staff, to Council, to committees, to allow them to have the best possible information available to them moving forward and to make those decisions."

"I think it helps that we have heard so many times 'the fit within our community' and I think it does help when we have these experts sit down and they give that expert opinion on whether things fit in what our vision is for this Town."

The creation of a DRP was backed by former councillor Bob McRoberts, a member of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC). In a visual presentation to Council, Mr. McRoberts outlined a number of key heritage areas around the Town that have seen houses torn down and replaced with modern buildings, some more modern and some larger than their neighbours.

Some of these builds were in keeping with the heritage feel of the neighbourhood, said Mr. McRoberts, but there were a number of exceptions.

"I believe HAC members would appreciate [this] and the Town would benefit from having input from a DRP," he said, noting such a panel could consist of volunteer architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and professional engineers who could offer "objective advice about preserving the uniqueness of properties and compatibility with new developments with their surroundings."

"Two Council terms ago, there was a somewhat major issue with restricting monster homes in neighbourhoods," he continued. "It drew a significant number of delegations both for and against to this microphone. It is possible to build large houses that fit the character of the neighbourhood. I believe some things are not worth preserving, but I also believe the ability to preserve heritage buildings and heritage streetscapes is dependent on one's level of caring and knowledge of what and how to do so. Having a DRP will certainly enhance our knowledge."

A Design Review Panel is not a new idea for Aurora, having been part of Aurora's Promenade Plan for years, but not implemented. Councillor Mrakas' motion spurred action to bring this forward. For Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, panels exist in other municipalities comprised of urban designers, engineers and architects and "would also assist in meeting the objectives of the Official Plan to achieve high quality urban design within the Town."

The proposal received enthusiastic support from Council members, including John Abel and Sandra Humfries, who both served on HAC in the last Council term. They questioned whether the formation of a DRP would be vetted by the Committee and whether the restoration of the position of Heritage Planner at Town Hall would go part and parcel with the new panel. Both questions will be born out of the upcoming terms of reference, stated Mayor Geoff Dawe.

"People who were here last year remember the somewhat interesting discussion on a heritage district on the south side of

Wellington,? said Mayor Dawe. ?There were some substantial concerns expressed by owners in that area, so I think Mr. Ramunno will need to consider that. The other challenge I have, quite frankly, is designated or listed properties. There have been instances where someone's property has been listed without them knowing. I think we need to be very clear in how we approach that because that can be very arbitrary.?