

Park plan provides a 'unique opportunity': Councillors

By Brock Weir

Hillary-McIntyre Park, the plan to bring together three historic properties along Yonge Street to create a 'heritage park' could take a very important step forward this week.

The revised plan developed by consultants now calls for significantly increased private sector involvement with less emphasis on museum spaces and more for commercial and office use.

'There has been a lot of effort and work, including a tremendous study that this is something we should be considering,' said Councillor Sandra Humfries. 'Although we are all nervous about the costs, operations and capital funding, I think this is the next step to understand what all that really means.'

Councillor John Abel was on a similar wavelength. Rejecting the idea put forth by other Councillors that proponents of the plan should get the ball rolling on securing grants from the Federal and Provincial Government, along with associated granting bodies, he said in order for that to happen the Town needs to acquire the lands first.

'I am all for moving forward and acquiring those properties,' said Councillor Abel. 'It is a unique opportunity on Yonge Street to maintain the heritage of our town, but also engage the community, create trails and parks' and it has to be able to not be a burden on the taxpayers in operation or capital investment. That is where you need the properties.

'It is a treasure that we can celebrate for the next generation and generations to come.'

For Councillor Chris Ballard, a long-time and vocal advocate for the Aurora Promenade Plan, the development of the Hillary-McIntyre Park concept within the promenade area would be an interesting development. Although he said he was cautious about Aurora getting into 'the business of land speculation' said he was 'delighted' the plan put so much emphasis on the promenade plan and efforts to preserve the 'unique' heritage of Aurora and voting in favour of the motion would pave the way for answers to important questions.

'This was highlighted as one of the jewels of Downtown Aurora in need of serious consideration about how we were to utilize it, ensure it was used and not lost, and to think about how we would move forward in helping us to build a viable downtown core and helping us to develop and sustain the unique Aurora identity,' said Councillor Ballard.

'We will most likely have Hillary House, we're not willing to flip it, the costs of running it will be ours in perpetuity. We need to think these things through so [moving forward] it is not going to be a huge burden on taxpayers.'

While some were more cautious than others about giving the green light to beginning negotiations, some like Councillor John Gallo said they were supportive of this as the next step towards developing a master plan to 'guide the development' of the site and its operations.

Mayor Geoffrey Dawe was, however cautious, stating support of the motion on the table bound Council to nothing, but all risks associated with the plan needed to be fully understood. What is necessary, he added, is a report outlining all opportunities for government support and private sector investment.