

Public has sharp words for heritage plan

By Brock Weir

Plans for a \$10 million heritage park combining three landmark properties on Aurora's north stretch of Yonge Street have been put on ice for up to three months but members of the public have some heated views on how the project has proceeded so far.

In the works for over two years, the project as originally proposed would incorporate Hillary House, Aurora's only National Historic site, currently owned by the Aurora Historical Society (AHS), Horton Place at the corner of Yonge Street and Irwin Avenue, currently owned by AHS president John McIntyre, and the home in the middle owned by realtor Bruce Spragg, into a four acre heritage destination.

As Council looks for potential partners to help make the project a reality, some members of the AHS cried foul at assumptions made that Hillary House would be up for grabs last week.

Speaking at the Society's Annual General Meeting held Thursday night in the Hillary House ballroom, long-time AHS members Carol Way and Helen Roberts, the latter a past president of the AHS, had some words for the projects proponents.

Members said they felt they had been kept out of the loop about Hillary House being part of a potential heritage park deal, relying on media reports and word of mouth rather than communication to the AHS membership. Members, they said, should have a say about whether their prime asset under their umbrella should be included in the mix.

Also speaking up on the project were delegates to last week's Council meeting. Although divergent in their views on the plan, one thing they had in common was the need for a much wider public interest in the future of the properties.

"As a citizen of Aurora, I would like to see the area renewed, revitalized and protected," said Svetla Topouzova, a Council candidate in this year's municipal election, and a member of Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee, whose husband, George, was elected to the AHS board on Thursday night.

"I would like the Town to take an active role in the preservation and history of the area and open the communication with the AHS. I would also like to suggest the Town engage the AHS board of directors and request they present their vision, goals, and plans for the future of Hillary House and the entire area."

Arguing it would be the best interests of the Town to have a clear and concise registry of all non-profits operating in Aurora to outline all potential players, she said the Hillary-McIntyre plan is a rare opportunity to address revitalization, the upcoming Cultural Master Plan for the Town of Aurora, as well as a way to provide "attractive" amenities which will, in turn, attract new development.

To this end, she suggested a wider ranging method of getting a vision.

"The Town should open a contest and present opportunities to private business to develop projects and then compete between private businesses presenting different projects on a big space."

This was an idea which intrigued David Heard, a member of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee. Mr. Heard took a more pointed approach to the debate, but suggested a contest is an idea worth exploring.

"I am not as optimistic and jumping for joy [about the plan]," said Mr. Heard. "If this is such a wonderful, tremendous, incredible idea? I find it offensive that the public has been kept kind of in the dark about this for a long time. I am shocked at what has transpired.

"I believe the highest form of bullying is exclusion and not informing the public clearly, not having a business plan, not having a

plan of sustainability, not sharing that with the public, but they want \$11 million of taxpayers' money to just go ahead and buy the property and worry about it later.

?There is no plan, there is no sustainability. We haven't seen it yet. We're into February. There is an election coming. If this is such a great thing, put it on the ballot. Let the taxpayers decide. This is a lot of money and you have a lot more stuff on the table, too. There are a lot of citizens that are very concerned.?