

Township, Seneca unite to repurpose historic Eaton Hall

By **Mark Pavilons**EditorLocal Journalism Initiative

The historic Eaton Hall will get a new lease on life, thanks to an agreement between King Township and Seneca College. Councillors gave their stamp of approval on the new deal, which will see the famous site revamped and repurposed. Plans are in the works for Township and Seneca staff to work together, designating Eaton Hall as a municipal capital facility. It will be exempt from taxation and the facility will be available for public use. The college initiated the request to council and they wanted to use the facility for special events such as weddings, conferences, etc. In order to do so, the building requires substantial improvements. Staff noted Eaton Hall is an important, significant heritage asset. It has a long history associated with one of Canada's best known families, the Eatons, founders of Eaton's department stores. There are several buildings on the 700-acre property that is home to the 35,000-square-foot mansion. It was designed to be the Eaton family country estate and was also a working farm, producing things like butter, milk and flowers for the Eaton stores. The Eatons had planned to retire in King. Lady Eaton was 60 and a grandmother when the estate was completed by 1940. Lady Eaton and her husband, Sir John Craig Eaton, acquired their first parcels of land in King Township in 1920 on recommendation from their friend Sir Henry Pellatt, who owned the nearby Mary Lake property. It took two years to assemble the entire 700 acres. Lady Eaton moved into Eaton Hall three years after demolishing her city mansion, Ardwood. Eaton Hall is adjacent to a body of water named Lake Seneca today, formerly Lake Jonda (a combination of the first three letters of her son John David Eaton's first and middle names). Design was started in 1932 by architects from the firm of Peter Allward and George Gouinlock. Construction was completed in 1939 and was supervised by John W. Bowser of the Aurora Building Company. Bowser had just worked on the Empire State Building and his Aurora gravesite contains a marker in the shape of that New York landmark. A heritage study back in 2012 indicated the hall, and other structures exhibit high cultural heritage value worthy of protection. As part of the lease arrangement with the hospitality company, Seneca will offer affordable and accessible recreation and heritage event space and programs for King residents, non-profits and community groups. The college agreed to offer the ground lease to the municipality for 99 years, at \$1 per year. It was challenging to calculate the actual taxes that could be levied on just a portion of the large property. Township staff hired a consultant to conduct an appraisal of the building and seven acres surrounding the facility. This was subjectively pegged at upwards of \$14 million. However, the property doesn't currently pay property taxes, so there is no loss of revenue to the Township. Council also amended the current ground lease with Seneca (made to accommodate the new recreation centre) from 60 years to 99 years. This is advantageous for the municipality for a number of reasons, including a longer-term control of a capital asset, and the ability to refurbish and extend the life cycle of such an asset. Mayor Steve Pellegrini said King is proud having both Seneca and Eaton Hall in the community. It's important to retain the building's history and to purpose it for public use. Councillor Debbie Schaefer agreed, noting Eaton Hall is very much part of Canada's history. "It's wonderful to think of this structure being brought back to life," she said, adding King is thrilled to be working with Seneca on this.