

Council wants better process for heritage register

By Mark Pavilons

King councillors want a more streamlined and effective method of dealing with properties selected for inclusion in the Township's heritage register.

Placing homes and properties on the register has always been a bit of an emotional issue among taxpayers, often leading to vocal objections at council. Township staff, heritage committee members and councillors have tried, umpteen times, to explain the register to residents, often to no avail.

Staff presented a revised process for adding heritage properties to the register, and councillors were still at odds in how to deal with the issue.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini pointed out some residents want it, and this list serves an important purpose. He noted that some properties have more historical significance than others, so perhaps there's a way for staff to create a priority list.

Councillor Debbie Schaefer, a strong advocate for the register, said it's tough to define or say what's more or less significant. The Heritage Act sets out the main reasons and criteria for listing a heritage property.

Councillor Bill Cober, ever the pro-citizen voice, said the 'criteria' is the owner. 'If they want it, give it to them. If not, don't,' he said. 'The people get to decide. That's my criteria.'

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti said there is a need to preserve heritage sites. He agreed there seems to be too many properties coming to council to add to the register. He would also like to see a method where staff can 'pick out the gems.'

According to planning director Stephen Kitchen, staff made a number of modest revisions to the work plan, including implementing an approximate three-month timeline between public information sessions and subsequent recommendations to council. Staff is also directed to group smaller numbers of properties together, and replacing notification by registered mail to regular mail.

Recognizing cultural heritage is one of the mandates of the Community Sustainability Plan, and so the register plays a role in this. Conserving heritage properties is the responsibility of the municipality.

Being on the register means owners must provide 60 days' notice of proposed demolition. Being on the register does not carry any restrictions or obligations on the part of the property owner. It doesn't affect land use or zoning.

In his report, Kitchen noted listing properties on the register should be proactive rather than reactive or preventive. By identifying properties in advance, there's a better chance of saving them in the future.

Currently, there are some 300 properties on the build heritage inventory that have yet to be reviewed by council, making them vulnerable to demolition, without recourse.

The listing process has been evolving since the Township began tackling properties in earnest, in 2012. Since then, 137 properties have been added to the register.

The work plan was updated in August of 2013 and public sessions, to inform the public, were held. When properties are selected, owners can ask for a re-evaluation by the Heritage Advisory Committee, before going to council.

The committee still has some 131 properties to be reviewed.

Township staff will continue to hold public information sessions before recommendations are presented to council. These, Kitchen noted, 'provide a good opportunity to address resident concerns, explain the process for listing properties on the Heritage Register and possible implications ...'

These sessions also explain the differences between listing and 'designation' to property owners.

Along with the work plan revisions, staff and the HAC members will carry out a number of initiatives to promote heritage in King and educate the public about preserving our past. Staff and committee members have discussed the matter with local real estate companies to increase heritage awareness.

King will participate in Ontario Doors Open 2016, which will be held Sept. 17. This day recognizes and celebrates local heritage.