

Heritage register causes uproar, confusion

By Mark Pavilons

The road to good intentions can be a bumpy one at times.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the process used by King Township to encourage property owners to place their historic lands on the heritage register.

Residents became quite vocal in their opposition at the Sept. 14 council meeting. They objected to being singled out for the register, and convinced King councillors to remove their properties from further consideration.

Despite public meetings, explanatory letters and words of encouragement from King Heritage Committee volunteers, residents are still under the impression being placed on the Heritage register carries negative connotations. The bottom line is they don't want anything affecting their homes or properties. And nothing seems to change their minds.

Resident after resident appeared before council, asking to be removed from consideration. They argued placing their homes on the register would devalue their property. Many questioned the historic significance placed on their properties.

"I strongly object to the Heritage Committee and the Township telling me what I can and cannot do with my property," wrote on Highway 27 homeowner. "I do not feel a group of volunteers along with the Township should tell me what or what not to do with my property."

In the end, councillors voted to remove those who asked for it, dwindling the recommended list of 29 down to 16 new properties to be added to the register.

A frustrated Peter Iaboni, chair of King's Heritage Advisory Committee, pointed out committee members put in a lot of work to research the historic properties and put their recommendations forward. "A lot of people care about King's heritage and do whatever possible to maintain our heritage," he said.

There is a lot of misinformation regarding the register and he explained it places no restrictions whatsoever on property owners.

Basically, being placed on the heritage register requires the owner to give the Township 60 days' notice if a building is being demolished. The 60 days allows for thoughtful reflection on the value of the property's cultural heritage and whether any or all of the buildings/structures should be retained or be thoroughly documented.

He said he can't imagine that such a listing devalues properties or causes their insurance rates to rise, as one homeowner contended.

He admitted to being frustrated by people (including councillors) who are not fully informed.

There are more benefits to the register than not, he observed.

The HAC is mandated to advise council on heritage matters and acting as a resource for citizens in matters pertaining to preservation, restoration and renovation of heritage properties. Creating the heritage inventory and register is also part of their scope. In January 2012, council approved a plan to review and evaluate more than 500 properties included in the Built Heritage Inventory and identify which should be added to the Township's Municipal Heritage Register. Since that time, 145 properties have been reviewed by the Committee of the Whole and 121 have been added to the register and 33 were designated under the Ontario Heritage Act.

Inclusion of a property on the register does not introduce restrictions or obligations on the property owner, nor does it affect zoning or land use. It simply allows for the recognition of the property's heritage value and allows staff to consider this value in the land use planning process. There is a potential for a cost to property owners, should the municipality request a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) prior to a building's demolition.

Stephen Kitchen, King's planning director, noted a community meeting was held to provide this information to the public and affected property owners. It was well attended and the Township impressed upon them the value they place on heritage and exactly what it means to be on the list.

Councillor Debbie Schaefer, who sits on the HAC, said the Township has an obligation to conserve its culture and heritage. It's not about aesthetics, but rather it shows "where we came from." "It's about 25 years from now and without such historic designations, all signs of our past would be gone."

Councillor Linda Pabst said if the register places a burden on homeowners she opposes it. She does encourage those property owners who wish a heritage designation to pursue it.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti is convinced that placing a home on the register does impact its resale value, or would perhaps drive potential buyers away.

He likes heritage buildings and was pleased that several historic buildings in King City have been repurposed.

He does, however, have trouble legitimizing a process that affects people's homes and lives "everything they have." "I can't in good

conscience, force them,"he said.

Councillor Avia Eek said King is known for working with residents and "we shouldn't usurp their rights."

Councillor Bill Cober, reflecting on discussions over the years, stressed nothing will ever trump property ownership.

"When a private landowner says no thank-you, it's no thank-you,"Cober said.

He suggested the Township revamps the process and makes it "by invitation"to encourage people who want to be "ambassadors for heritage."

"The current process is not working,"he said, adding King has to find a balance and come up with a solution.

Kitchen admitted it's not working, but stressed staff and volunteers have spent a lot of time and money on the process and sending registered letters to homeowners. They held a working session for the public to fully explain the intricacies of the register, in hopes of alleviating misconceptions.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini acknowledged those efforts, but said "there is a disconnect."

He, too, won't impose any hardship on homeowners.

He suggested the Township go after those "easy wins"???"those who want to be on the register or who want heritage designation.

Staff will arrange a working session for council to find ways of improving this process.