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Town of Aurora
Committee of the Whole Report
No. CMS24-050

Subject: Aurora Historical Society – Hillary House – Consultation Feedback

Prepared by: Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services

Department: Community Services

Date: December 2, 2024

Recommendation

1. That Report No.CMS24-050 be received; and
2. That Council authorize staff to negotiate with the Aurora Historical Society and bring back a report in Closed Session with recommendations.

Executive Summary

Aurora Historical Society (AHS) and the Town completed public consultation to help discover the public’s view and desire for the Hillary House’s sustainability. This report contains a summary of those results with the goal of providing AHS and Town Council with some recommendations.

- The Aurora Historical Society reached out to the Town seeking interest in exploring options on the future sustainability of the Hillary House.
- Together, the Aurora Historical Society and the Town generated several questions that were used to help determine the public’s view on the future of the Hillary House.
- Following the survey results, the Aurora Historical Society considered their position and confirmed their preference for the future of the Hillary House.
- Capital repair and restoration cost estimate has been established based on a condition assessment on the Hillary House for work that needs to take place over the next 10 years with varying degrees of urgency.

- If the Town assumes day-to-day maintenance of the Hillary House, there would be an annual operating expense to maintain the facility to Town standards.

Background

The Aurora Historical Society reached out to the Town seeking interest in exploring options on the future sustainability of the Hillary House.

On June 4, 2024, co-chairs from the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) made a presentation at the Committee of the Whole meeting to share their membership's request for Council to consider entering discussions regarding the future sustainability of the Hillary House. Staff also provided a report on this date (CMS24-021) seeking Council approval to proceed with discussions with AHS. Council passed the following motion:

1. That Report No. CMS24-021 be received; and
2. That the Town consult with the Aurora Historical Society and its members to receive their input on the future of Hillary House; and
3. That the Town and the Aurora Historical Society together host public consultations on the future of Hillary House; and
4. That staff report back to Council following these consultations with recommendations on the Hillary House.

Analysis

Together, the Aurora Historical Society and the Town generated several questions that were used to help determine the public's view on the future of the Hillary House

Town staff and members of the AHS worked together to establish the plan for community engagement. It was decided that staff would take the matter to the Heritage Advisory Committee seeking their input and the AHS Board would discuss it with their membership at their Annual General Meeting. In addition, a public survey was generated with questions the AHS and Town staff felt would best poll the community of future opportunities for Hillary House.

The survey was launched on the Town's Engage Aurora platform and was promoted via social media, digital and print advertising and through the Town's email newsletter. The survey ran from October 1 – 20, 2024.

Survey Results Summary:

- 165 Respondents (51 non-resident, 114 resident)
- 76% have visited Hillary House at least once.
- 25% are current members of AHS
- 89% agree or strongly agree that the Town should acquire and preserve the Hillary House.
- 79% strongly disagree that the Town should not acquire the Hillary House and instead encourage the AHS to seek alternative solutions, which may include selling the property on the open market.
- 79% somewhat disagree or strongly disagree that the Town should acquire the Hillary House but then repurpose or lease the property for potential commercial use within the strictures as set out in the agreement with the Ontario Heritage Trust. These respondents provided suggestions that the Hillary House remain a museum, preserved as a historical public entity, or a possible meeting location. While preserving the museum/heritage, others suggested possibly merging the museum use with possible event space or café.
 - The remaining 21% provided a few suggestions in support of commercial space that the Hillary House could be repurposed as a café, restaurant, wedding venue, event space, office, spa
- 86% somewhat agree or strongly agree that the Town should acquire Hillary House and continue to provide programming within Hillary House.
- 86% somewhat agree or strongly agree that the Town should provide additional funding to the Aurora Historical Society to maintain and continue to provide programming within the Hillary House.

In summary, most respondents prefer that the Town acquire and provide additional funding to maintain the Hillary House. And most respondents prefer that the Hillary House is preserved as a museum and public entity.

Following the survey results, the Aurora Historical Society considered their position and confirmed their preference for the future of the Hillary House

First, it is important to note that the final resolution with respect to the future of Hillary House must be approved by the membership of the Aurora Historical Society (AHS). With that said, the AHS Board of Directors offered the following observations on the survey:

- They were very pleased with the number of responses – 165 - to the survey. And that 75% of the respondents did not self-identify as members of the Aurora Historical Society.

- There was strong support for the Town of Aurora to acquire the property, that is, Hillary House and the grounds; and to keep it functioning as it is currently.

The AHS Board has considered three main options for the future of Hillary House:

- Status Quo: As they have stated on numerous occasions to Council, both at the Financial Advisory Committee and yearly budget meetings, this is not a viable option. The AHS simply lacks the capability to raise sufficient funds to properly maintain Hillary House, let alone carry out the very necessary repairs / upgrades.
- The ACC Model: This is the Aurora Cultural Centre (ACC) model, whereby the Town owns and maintains the actual facility and the ACC Board of Directors is responsible for programming (with financing provided by their own fundraising as well as an operating grant from the Town).
- The AMA Model: This is the Aurora Museum and Archives (AMA) model whereby the Town both owns and operates the entity.

Also considered was the option of Hillary House remaining as an asset of the AHS, but with the Town taking over the maintenance and repairs, and the AHS could continue to support the operations with fund raising and/or grant applications for capital work (this might be considered a super-set of the "Status Quo" option). The Board did not feel this to be a long-term feasible option, as at this point, they simply do not have the resources, nor is there visibility to when they would have the resources to make this type of commitment.

AHS Board Recommendations:

Subject to approval in principle by Council, the AHS Board is prepared to recommend to the Membership that the Town of Aurora assume full ownership of Hillary House and grounds as well as assuming responsibility for programming.

We would also recommend to the Membership that the Aurora Historical Society remain as an operating entity to assist, as appropriate, in the operation of and fundraising for Hillary House. As a registered charity, the AHS would be uniquely positioned to apply for grants that the Town would not have access to.

Additional Comments from AHS

- The Board, and indeed, the Membership of the AHS firmly believe that a restored Hillary House is of immense value to the Town. As well as maintaining it's status as a National Historic Site, it will provide an oasis of green in juxtaposition to the ongoing redevelopment on Yonge Street.

- As there is insufficient parking at Hillary House, the Town should consider proceeding with the redevelopment of the old works yard at the north end of Machell Avenue. This would greatly enhance the opportunities for more and larger tours, as well as a potential wedding venue.
- As the Town is currently considering enhancing Petch House (adding facilities such as water / wastewater) we would recommend the Town consider exploring the relocation of Petch House to the Hillary House grounds, thereby creating a great opportunity for long-term success as an attraction.

Capital repair and restoration cost estimate has been established based on a condition assessment on the Hillary House for work that needs to take place over the next 10 years with varying degrees of urgency.

A high-level condition assessment was completed and was based on a preliminary scope. The assessment summarized a need for approximately \$1.2 million in capital repair and restoration over the next 10 years (varying in degrees of urgency). In some cases, additional detailed assessments may be needed to fully determine the degree of work/risk/cost. For example, further excavation would be needed around the perimeter of the building to fully understand the depth or degree of the foundation concerns. Therefore, in areas such as this, a general observation was made. As such, the cost estimate of \$1.2 million should be understood as recommended allowances, rather than a construction cost estimate relating to a specific quantified scope of work. Also, the \$1.2 million cost estimate is based on today's values, therefore, it needs to be understood that this value will very likely rise as time passes.

In addition, consideration should be given to paving the existing driveway and parking area as it is currently gravel. Gravel requires a higher level of maintenance year-round and for long term maintenance asphalt is recommended. Approximate cost to pave the associated areas would be approximately \$25,000.

If the Town assumes day-to-day maintenance of the Hillary House, there would be an annual operating expense to maintain the facility to Town standards.

Staff estimate the facility operating cost to be in the range of \$25,000-\$35,000 per year. This is based on the historical figures provided by the AHS plus additional costs to maintain Town standards of maintenance. Facility costs include utilities, general repair and maintenance, service contracts and cleaning contracts.

Exterior landscape maintenance would include arboriculture, horticulture activities, turf maintenance and winter snow removal/salting. It is anticipated the operating costs for

these activities to range between \$20,000-\$25,000 yearly. These costs are based on what is currently on site.

If the Town becomes responsible for Hillary House, the AHS collection, and the AHS staffing complement, current staffing arrangements within the Town's Cultural Services Division related to heritage work would need to be re-organized. The addition of the AHS historic site and collection would require an increase in resources.

With Council's authority, staff would continue to negotiate an agreement with AHS, and an additional report would come to a Closed Session meeting in the future with additional details.

Advisory Committee Review

Staff consulted with the Heritage Advisory Committee on October 7, 2024, seeking their feedback on potential considerations for the long-term sustainability of the Hillary House. A summary of their comments is as follows:

- Hillary House should be owned and managed by the Town
- AHS as a volunteer board should not be the overseer of the building, or be responsible for managing the property
- The building can still be used as a museum or as a community space for events, tours, banquets, etc.
- Hillary House should also be enhanced through connectivity to the Fleury Park, trails system, Aurora Community Centre, the downtown core, rehabilitation of the water works site, etc.
- A key feature is the landscape element of the property, and the promotion of the landscaping and natural elements should be encouraged
- Marketing of the Hillary House needs to be expanded to connect with the public, school groups, etc. to increase awareness and heritage tourism opportunities.
- Federal grant funding should continue to be pursued

Being a designated heritage property, any potential future alterations to the building or property would be subject to review through the Heritage Permit Application process. Further, the property is also subject to a Conservation Easement with the Ontario Heritage Trust, with any potential alterations also being subject to Ontario Heritage Trust review and approval.

Legal Considerations

If Council directs staff to look into acquiring the Hillary House and assume its operations (the AMA model set out above), the Town will need to ensure that any obligations within the Conservation Easement are met. There is no obligation to obtain consent for the transfer of the property, however, once the property is transferred, the Ontario Heritage Foundation must be immediately notified of the transfer. Further, the Ontario Heritage Foundation requires the dwelling to be insured. If Council becomes the owner of the Hillary House, the property will be appraised and added to the Town's property list. In addition, the collection should also be appraised so that it could be added to the Town's insurance policy, assuming that the value of the collection is greater than the Town's deductible.

Lastly, the Conservation Easement requires the owner of the property to maintain the Hillary House and barn "...in as good and sound state of repair as a prudent owner would normally do..." to avoid deterioration of the heritage elements of the building. The owner is able to undertake repairs, however, any repairs, reconstruction or similar act that materially affects the appearance or construction of the heritage elements would require the approval of the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

If Council prefers the ACC Model set out above, staff recommend that an agreement be entered into with the AHS to set out the roles and responsibilities of all of the parties.

Financial Implications

Through a building condition assessment, it is anticipated that restoration work is required on the Hillary House at a minimum cost of approximately \$1.2 million. In addition, if the Town assumes responsibility for the day-to-day operation/maintenance of the Hillary House and grounds, staff have estimated approximately \$45,000-\$60,000 required in operating funds. This would include utilities, cleaning, grounds maintenance and basic maintenance.

The Town's present capital plan does not consider the noted minimum \$1.2 million in potential new asset management costs; nor, does it include a placeholder for the paving of the Hillary House's laneway. An increase to annual asset management contributions to reserves would also be necessary in support of the Hillary House's longer term asset management needs.

If the Town were to acquire the Hillary House, its estimated annual operating (maintenance) costs of \$45,000 to \$60,000 would require additional operating funds.

If the Town assumes responsibility for programming at the Hillary House, additional resources will need to be considered and would require additional operating funds.

Communications Considerations

Communications developed a survey in collaboration with Town staff and AHS representatives. The survey was promoted via social media, digital and print advertising and distributed via the Town's e-newsletter. Survey results are summarized earlier in this report.

Climate Change Considerations

The recommendations in this report do not impact greenhouse gas emissions or impact climate change adaptation.

Link to Strategic Plan

Exploring the Hillary House Considerations supports the following Strategic Plan goals and key objectives:

Supporting an exceptional quality of life for all in its accomplishment in satisfying requirements in the following key objectives within these goal statements:

- Invest in sustainable infrastructure
- Celebrating and promoting our culture
- Strengthening the fabric of our community

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

1. Council to provide further direction.

Conclusions

Following public consultation, the results demonstrate the public's interest in preserving the Hillary House as a museum and public entity. It also demonstrates the public's support for the Town to provide additional funding support to help maintain the facility. And most importantly, AHS has provided their recommendation seeking the Town's support in assuming full ownership of Hillary House and grounds as well as assuming responsibility for programming.

At this time, staff are seeking Council's interest and direction to continue to negotiate with AHS.

Attachments

Hillary House – Survey Results – October 2024

Previous Reports

CMS24-021 - Aurora Historical Society - Hillary House Considerations – June 4, 2024

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on November 14, 2024

Approvals

Approved by Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer