

Converting old school into museum?



Councillor Barb Shaughnessy had various plans on display at last Thursday's community meeting.

By Bill Rea

Could the Caledon area use a museum, and is the old Alton Public School the place for it?

That's one of the issues that was discussed last Thursday at a community meeting hosted by Caledon Councillor Barb Shaughnessy. She said her fellow Ward 1 Councillor Doug Beffort sent regrets.

The old building has not seen much use since January 2014, when the new school opened just to the north.

"To me, empty buildings mean death," Shaughnessy told the roughly 25 people at the meeting. "They need to have life."

She also stated clearly that she was hoping for some brainstorming, with ideas being put forth on what to do with this building she called a "gem." She also said it won't be simple.

"A lot of work is needed to go into that building," she added.

There are also complications involved. The building is still owned by the Peel District School Board, and it shares a septic system and parking lot with the new school. And since the Town doesn't own it, Shaughnessy said Caledon council is not willing to put any money in it.

"She's an historical gem, and she offers so much to the community," she said, adding there's a "tremendous community tie to the old school."

"We have to come up with some ideas on what could happen with the school," she declared. "I want people to start thinking about what they want for their community."

Shaughnessy said Town CAO Mike Galloway had suggested she reach out to the community and get people to take up the challenge to find a use for the building.

"We need to come up with options," she remarked. "I need the village of Alton to take ownership of it."

Shaughnessy agreed it will take time to get anything done. The Town's budget process for 2017 is already too far along to get anything financed for next year. She also said such a project would have to be looked at from a number of perspectives, like engineering, environmental, planning, etc.

"We have to have buy-in from the community," she said.

One woman at the meeting observed that both Wellington and Dufferin Counties have museums. She also pointed out Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA) in Brampton is some distance away for a lot of Caledon residents. The school could accommodate exhibits.

As well, she pointed out there have been expressions that the Alton branch of Caledon Public Library needs to expand. Last Thursday's meeting was held in the community room at the library, but she said the library could expand into that room, with community space being found in the old school.

"I think a museum is an asset," Shaughnessy said, although she added they would have to look into funding.

Another suggestion involved keeping the old school as an education facility, much the way the old Britannia School House was used. One woman observed elementary school students used to take annual field trips there to get some feeling for what schools used to be like.

One man commented the Town had budgeted money for a social centre in Alton, but it was never used. He also said Peel Region has promised sewers to Alton. The school board is waiting, but Regional council didn't approve the project, and there was no reaction from local councillors.

He said the museum would be a good idea, adding there are ways to resolve the sewer issues. He also said the school board had agreed to sell the building to the Town for \$1, once the sewers were in.

Shaughnessy said she's been told there is a way to divide the septic system

One man asked if there was any possibility of finding a residential use for the old school.

"It's hard to find residential land," he said.

Shaughnessy said that would be a challenge, adding there's not a lot of useable space in the basement. She said it might be possible for kids to have a kind of jam room downstairs, but they would also have to check out accessibility issues.

"It's all a matter of funding," one man said.

Shaughnessy also said the building is zoned institutional, and there would be a lot of requirements to meet to change that.

Heather Savage, manager of recreation for the Town, said the school board is anxious to see something done with the building too. If the Town is to take it on, there will have to be a solid business plan in order to get funding.

Shaughnessy said she would ask staff to start doing research, without making any commitment yet. And when the matter goes before council, she would want residents to be there to delegate.

"You're my back-up team," she declared. "The community has to be there, backing myself and Doug up."