

Many ideas on what to do with old Alton School

By Bill Rea

Town officials have said they want public input on what to do with the old Alton Public School, and they got it.

About 25 people were out for Tuesday's community meeting, and a range of suggestions were offered. Staff will be compiling this input and it will be going to council.

Ben Roberts, manager of business development, tourism and culture for the Town, couldn't guarantee they would be able to get the information to council before the end of the year. He simply said it would be done as soon as possible.

Ideas were gleaned after those at the meeting split off in groups to discuss the idea. There were a number of positive comments that emerged from the conversations.

'It's got so much energy,' was the way one woman described the building.

Suggestions from her group included setting aside one room in the school and preserving it as an old classroom, along the lines of the facility in Mississauga operated by the Peel District School Board, in the form of an Old Britannia Schoolhouse of the north.

That group also commented there could be a museum set up there in conjunction with the Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA), creating some form of satellite to the main facility in Brampton.

'It's too damned far and no one's willing to drive (to PAMA),' she declared, adding Caledon doesn't have an archive or museum.

Other suggestions from the group included using the building as a tourist information centre. There are a number of community groups in the area, such as the Alton Village Association and Alton Grange Association, and the building could be a source of office space for them. There was also a suggestion that Credit Valley Conservation could use it to run some of its programs.

One group thought Headwaters Arts might be able to make use of the facility.

There was considerable talk about Alton being a destination for tourism, and that led to a suggestion that part of the building be used as a bicycle rental facility, to enable people to explore the area.

Suggestions from other groups included creating pub nights, featuring local breweries, etc.

There was a brief mention suggesting the building be converted to residential or office use.

Some of the participants noted the natural resources in the area, with suggestions that some form of aggregate museum could be created.

As well, there were suggestions for some a recreational or cultural complex on the site.

Another suggestion that was aired involved moving the local public library into the school, demolishing the current library building and using the land for recreational facilities, including a pool and gym.

There was general agreement that the Board and Town need to work together on this.

There had originally been an understanding the Town would take over the old school once the new one was built about four years ago. The problem, according to a staff report that went to council in August, is both buildings are serviced by the same septic system, and they said separate ownership is not permitted in such cases. The Ontario Building Code requires that sewage systems be located wholly on the property of the building or buildings they serve.

The old school, which was closed in the summer of 2013, is currently vacant and is still owned by the Board.

Staff said in August the Board had indicated interest in a long-term lease arrangement with the Town, at a nominal rate. That would give the Town long-term use of the old building, with the municipality taking on responsibility for the costs, including capital improvements, maintenance, etc.

The Town had asked for a building condition assessment (BCA) of the old school to determine its current state, as well as what capital improvements might be needed down the road. The conclusions of the BCA indicate about \$652,000 in work will be required over the next five years. There will also have to be work done to make sure the upper floor complies with current accessibility standards. That would require washroom upgrades, door widening and the installation of automatic doors.

As well, operating costs of the building have been estimated at \$82,500.

Staff, in August, advocated negotiations with the Peel Board for fair consideration of a land exchange for the school. But the two local councillors, Barb Shaughnessy and Doug Beffort, were able to get that deferred so Tuesday's community meeting could take place.

Mayor Allan Thompson asked for indications from the people at Tuesday's meeting if they saw no value in the facility, and there were no takers. He added Town staff know there's a need to take a close look at this.

Shaughnessy observed the Board had suggested a lease arrangement, but she still didn't want to rule out the possibility of the Town owning the old school building. She agreed there are complications, such as those involving the septic system, but she could also see

some opportunity.

She added council doesn't like the idea of investing money into facilities the Town doesn't own.

One woman pointed out the Board and Town both get their money from the same taxpayer, so it's upsetting that they can't come to an agreement.

'Come on, guys,' she urged. 'Let's get off our butts and do something here.'

Shaughnessy observed the will is present, but there's the need to keep things moving forward.

Beffort said there had been talk about putting out requests for proposals (RFP) for the building, and he wondered what the Board thought of that.

Branko Vidovic, intermediate planning officer with the Board, said there didn't seem to be an issue with the RFP or the Town taking over the building, apart from the septic concerns.

'We really do need to move on something,' Beffort concluded.