

Parties will meet to decide future of old Alton School

By Bill Rea

Town of Caledon staff are not keen on getting into a long-term lease for the old Alton School House, but the two local councillors want more discussion.

Councillors last Tuesday, sitting in committee, took little time to approve a motion from Councillor Barb Shaughnessy deferring the staff recommendations and calling for a meeting on the issue.

The motion calls on the Town to coordinate the meeting of community stakeholders. Those stakeholders are to include, but not be limited to, the Alton Community Group, Heritage Caledon, Town staff, Peel District School Board, Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA), etc. They are to discuss findings from the Town's Tourism Strategy of 2014 that identified Alton as an arts and culture hub and consider possible uses for the school. It also calls for a meeting to take place by the end of October.

Staff had been advocating negotiations with the Peel Board for fair consideration of a land exchange for the school.

That had been agreed upon about four years ago when the new school in Alton was built. The staff report to council stated the Town was to receive the old building in exchange for the land for the new facility. The problem, according to staff, is both buildings are serviced by the same septic system, and they said private ownership is not permitted in such cases.

Staff stated 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 Peel Board.

Staff said 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. But the Board said the Town would have to pay for such a study. Staff said the municipality spent about \$5,000 on it, funding it through unplanned expenditures in the 2017 budget.

The conclusions of the BCA indicate about \$652,000 in work will be required over the next five years. That will include extensive interior and exterior finish upgrades, such as repairs to basement walls, exterior wall restoration, plumbing replacements, etc., as well as roof replacement. 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 also pointed out there's been no use for the old building determined at this time.

As well, staff cited constraints to possible future uses of the building, including maximum occupancy due to the septic system, limited parking during school hours and limited access to the parking lot when students are arriving at or leaving school.

Staff said the old school was built in the 1870s, with additions and remodeling in 1907 and '29, and it's regarded as a landmark on Main Street. It also has a heritage designation.

There was a meeting in July involving staff from the Town and Peel Board, as well as Shaughnessy, Councillor Doug Beffort and Trustee Stan Cameron. Staff stated that while the Board doesn't have funds to cover costs associated with the building, there was a verbal agreement to provide half the funding of a \$30,000 feasibility study to develop potential uses for the site, develop solutions to overcome the limitations and determine the costs for dealing with problems.

The staff report stated they have not yet developed the scope of this work, and there's been no independent confirmation that the necessary work can be done for \$30,000.