

Town approves heritage designation for Bolton core

By Bill Rea

There was opposition, but the long-anticipated heritage conservation designation (HCD) for the Bolton valley is now reality. Caledon council, at their last meeting of 2015, agreed to enact the necessary bylaw for the designation under the Ontario Heritage Act.

“The HCD designation enables the council of a municipality to manage and guide future change in the district through policies and guidelines for the conservation, protection and enhancement of the area's special character,” Mayor Allan Thompson observed. “This is an exciting step for the Town, to maintain our rich heritage in Bolton, and preserve and keep alive our history in Caledon. We have seen great success with HCDs in other municipalities in Ontario and I look forward to the excitement that this will bring to the town.”

Town staff reported there are a number of benefits to an HCD. In other municipalities, staff reported they have been shown to conserve and enhance a sense of place and unique character; increase cultural and historical tourism; attract and retain stable businesses; and protect property values and make them more resilient to economic downturn.

Opposition came from some in the business community.

Jean Carberry, representing both herself and the local Business Improvement Area (BIA) of which she's chair, told councillors commercial property owners in the core were largely opposed to the designation. She said that was determined after the BIA did an impartial survey.

Carberry added she understood there was a petition in support of the designation. She hadn't seen it, but understood it had been signed mainly by residents and tenants of the core. She maintained it's the commercial property owners who have the real vested interest.

“I stand by the results of the survey,” she declared.

Carberry also argued these arrangements work best when the property owners are on side.

She also wasn't accepting suggestions that property values are likely to improve because of the designation. She said that would happen only because of inflation.

She added potential owners of retail properties would be discouraged.

She also resisted the idea that the designation will cut planning red tape, arguing it will be the same as now.

“I would suggest to you that Bolton downtown is dead or dying,” Carberry said, adding it's not a place to attract shoppers or tourists. There are ways to revitalize things, but she said this isn't one of them. She urged councillors to defer the matter so other options could be examined. She said the BIA was ready to work with the town on that.

Local resident Valerie Mackie said she attended a public information meeting on the matter that was held in November, and she sensed great support for this.

She also said she submitted three pages of signatures in support. They included 41 from residents and 23 from business operators. As well, she said nine commercial property owners signed, including eight who actually run businesses. Mackie added she had letters of support from five other commercial property owners.

She also denied suggestions that the core is dying. She cited Innovations Creative Fix on Queen Street. “It's the most inviting salon I've ever seen,” she said, adding other businesses in the core that offer inviting ambience.

Mackie observed the first HCD was approved in Meadowvale in 1980, which was not a great time for the economy. There are now 121 of them in Ontario, and none of those designations have been rescinded. She argued there's evidence they are useful tools in revitalization.

There have been comments about a highway running through the core. Mackie countered there are two Regional roads there, with 50-km-h speed limits. As well, restrictions have been placed on heavy trucks in the core, and she said the impact “was felt almost overnight.”

This promises a safer environment with less noise or pollution, she argued.

Caledon's former heritage resource officer Heather Broadbent told councillors she's lived in Bolton 28 years.

“I care very deeply for the village,” she declared.

She added the reports on the study into the designation were the best she'd ever read.

Broadbent also read a submission from Jimmy Pountney, who owns Innovation and is the former chair of the BIA.

He stated he's been to a number of BIAs in areas with HCD designations, and seen success stories.

He cited Orangeville, which he said is comparable to Bolton, commenting it received its designation in 2002. Orangeville was

recently cited for having the best Main Street in Canada.

Pountney stated Bolton now has a bypass, as well as a transportation plan. While change is inevitable, he stressed the need to keep the familiar character of small areas.

Councillor Annette Groves acknowledged a lot of work went into this. But she had problems with the division between residential and commercial property owners.

‘It’s not a productive way of doing things when you have that divisiveness in the community,’ she remarked.

Groves also said businesses are struggling throughout Bolton, not just in the core, although she had heard as well that the truck restrictions have been an improvement.

But she also said she couldn’t support the designation until the divisive aspects have been addressed.

‘It was a long process, with a lot of engagement,’ Councillor Rob Mezzapelli commented, adding they would never get complete agreement.

‘Bolton is a special place for me,’ he said. ‘It needs to be preserved.’

He also cited reduced assessments has been raised as an argument against the designation.

But Mezzapelli said he didn’t see the negatives. If HCDs result is reduced assessments, he wondered why they keep growing.

He also said there has been a lot of ‘very deep and very wide’ consultation, and he was satisfied that the public was encouraged to provide input, listened to and was heard.

‘I’m going to give this my absolute support,’ he declared.

Councillor Nick deBoer commented that a lot of forward-looking people support this, and so did he.

Councillor Johanna Downey said she grew up in Bolton.

‘I hold downtown Bolton near and dear to my heart,’ she said. ‘I think it’s exactly what Bolton needs.’

Councillor Doug Beffort commented the core is not decaying.

Thompson called the designation ‘flexible and enabling.’