

Committee, second storey on fire hall, purchase recommended

Dr. George Elliott spoke on the alternatives to demolition of Acton town hall Monday. Following is the text of his speech.

As you know we are here to plead the case of Acton's Town Hall. Bricks and stones cannot speak so we who respect and appreciate that old building must do its pleading for it. After all it is virtually the last historic public building left in Acton; so many others are no more. It is doubly difficult for us tonight because we understand from press reports that we are pleading a lost cause. It seems Council's mind is already made up with respect to the building's fate. As Citizens of Acton though we must do what is humanly possible to spare it from the wrecker's hammer.

You are all familiar with the consultant engineer's report and I would like to quote from it.

"... the building is a particularly fine example of the type of architecture common in southern Ontario during the late 1800's."

"... the first and second floors of the building appear visually to be in good order."

"... most of the defective brickwork can be removed and replaced at crack locations."

"... there is only one crack into the foundations, which is fortunate since only a small amount of underpinning may be necessary."

"... there are no floor deflections in either first or second floors except a small area at the rear of the stage."

"... the plaster is in quite good condition."

"... generally the wood is in very sound condition."

All of these comments suggest our Town Hall is still a good, and potentially useful structure. Defects there are, but they are repairable and due only to ravages of time and changes in building code specifications.

Why should we keep Acton Town Hall? The Province has been concerned about conservation of our heritage in Ontario. This concern is expressed in legislation enabling municipalities to protect our heritage into the future. I can put the case in a pamphlet entitled, "Architectural Conservation and the Ontario Heritage Act", which explains the intent of the legislation.

"The conservation and preservation of our architectural environment provide an important link with the past and a familiar bridge to the future. Appreciation and respect for the past are essential in order to maintain a sense of place and historical continuity."

"New buildings and modifications to existing ones are required by our developing culture and changing society. However acknowledging this need is not sufficient reason for the senseless destruction of our architectural past."

"Every community has buildings of architectural and historical significance. All types of buildings and structures regardless of age may warrant special protection. In smaller communities where fewer buildings exist, the ones with special architectural or historical character

become even more apparent."

Acton's Town Hall situation seems to be exactly described by these statements. The Ontario Heritage Act gives municipalities power to protect heritage properties from demolition. Unfortunately it is silent as to how such properties can be protected when the municipality itself is the party threatening demolition.

It is my understanding that Council will shortly appoint an Architectural Conservation Advisory Board under the terms of the Act to protect the heritage of Halton Hills. It is also my understanding that some members to be appointed to this Board see as their first priority designation of Acton's Town Hall as a heritage property. That is if the Town Hall still exists.

Many citizens have come together to help in presenting our case for the Town Hall. Older folk remembering its history, newcomers to Acton in flight from city bedroom suburbs recognizing it as part of the richer community life they seek, and young people who have never known it other than as a rather dilapidated building at the corner of Willow and Bower, all have contributed ideas to the presentation of this brief. It is understandable that older citizens would regret the loss of our Town Hall because it is filled with memories for them. But young people have been expressing the most dismay at losing the building. Why young people? Many of them have never been in it; why should they care what happens to the Town Hall. They do care though. In fact 500 of them have signed a petition.

Adults sometimes despair that today's youth couldn't care less about old values and past practices. But young people know what is important to themselves. It is not old attitudes and outdated ideas they support but real and enduring ideals and things they can feel and touch. Students today travel the world as we never could. They see the respect and affection other nations have for their old monuments. They return to Acton and find the heritage to a past they can never know disappearing before their eyes. No wonder they are dismayed.

To destroy cultural or historical things for any reason is a serious thing, not to be done without sober and soul searching thought; to destroy them for no reason is vandalism. How can we as a society condemn the teenager who thoughtlessly tosses a stone through a school window when we with no more thought would pull down a historic building to make a parking lot. We say he must learn history in school; then we let him watch as we show our respect for that history by destroying it. These are strong statements but remember we are pleading a lost cause.

This then is our moral argument for preserving Acton's Town Hall but we realize that Council has to make decisions based on

economic and practical considerations as well. Let us consider some of these. There are three problems connected to restoration of the Town Hall for which answers must be found. These are as follows.

1) How would restoration of the Hall be financed?

2) How will the legitimate and demonstrated needs of Acton's Fire Brigade be met if restoration takes place?

3) How will the restoration be justified in terms of practical use of the Hall and its day to day maintenance?

We have not had much time to look for answers but a number have come up for suggestion to Council. These come from many Citizens and all have some merit. There is truth in the old saying, "In a democracy all of us are smarter than any of us".

1.) Restoration financing. Council would have to pay for demolition of the Town Hall, about \$40,000 has been estimated. Let us use this money constructively rather than destructively. Matching grants are available from Wintario, other grants are available from the Ministry of Culture and Recreation and the Ontario Heritage Foundation. If there was a recreation component in the restoration, eg. Senior Citizens, Little Theater, Choral society, etc., other grants would also be possible. Acton has a history of funding in large part the things it wants by public subscription rather than taxation; eg., Community Center, Lions Club Pool, Band Hall. This public financial interest would no doubt be available for a Town Hall restoration project. A sum of \$130,000 is not much when an indifferent house costs half that much and municipal budgets are in millions of dollars. Money has been found in Acton before and can be again. 2.) Fire Brigade needs.

Acton's Firefighters have needed more space for some time; everyone recognizes that fact. Their excellent and much appreciated services to Acton should be recognized by providing for their needs as quickly as possible. Restoration of the Town Hall need not interfere, it is not urgent immediately, planning and fund raising can take place over a period of several years. Firefighters' needs are urgent.

Let us complete the second storey of the Fire Hall at once then and let us make its ap-



IN THE FRONT row of spectators for the special council meeting Monday night was Laura Wiles, due to celebrate her 84th birthday the next day. She was one of about 100 who wanted to see the town hall preserved. The council chamber was packed with the largest delegation ever.

pearance compatible with the Town Hall facade so that the two buildings compliment each other as they should. The space lost on the second floor of the Fire Hall by the presence of the Town Hall stage area could be gained back by making one of the windows in the stage area a doorway into the second floor of the Town Hall. The Town Hall auditorium would then be available to the firefighters if they needed extra training space. It is quite likely that in a restored Town Hall the auditorium would be made suitable for social events and that it could be licensed. The firefighters could use it for such functions for themselves and their families.

Firefighter parking requirements are another problem. Many citizens feel the present fast street parking arrangements are excellent, efficient, and managed neatly by the firefighters. Apparently this is true most of the time but there are occasions, on Fridays and Saturdays usually, when it is difficult for firefighters to find a parking space. This is because spaces are used by shoppers in the downtown area. We all know that firefighting delays are a matter of life and death often so this is a serious problem. There are potential solutions though.

The police station could be moved to another location to free some parking spaces. The property immediately to

the south of the Hall might be purchased, perhaps with money slated for the Hall's demolition, and the area turned into a parking lot exclusively for firefighters. Perhaps it would be even better to use this space for off street municipal parking and forbid street parking adjacent to the Fire Hall except for firefighters. This would permit them to use their fast and efficient street parking procedure at all times without worry about availability of spaces and yet not decrease the amount of municipal parking available to shoppers. The problem demands careful investigation and thought. The problem will not likely be efficiently and satisfactorily solved by turning

the Town Hall into a parking lot.

3.) Justification of restoration. It has been stated the Town Hall was out of use for 25 years. This is not completely true. The downstairs has been used by Senior Citizens and Police. The upstairs was used by the Band until ten years ago. During that time the Band installed a furnace, wiring for lighting, and insulation for windows during the winter. This material was all moved to the Band Hall when it was completed in 1966. The upstairs hall was not used subsequently because lack of heat and lighting made it unusable. The Band was completely satisfied with the Hall while

they were there and had no problems other than those created by lack of facilities. As many as 50 to 75 used the Hall at times. For four years I spent two or three nights a week in the hall. It never failed to amaze me that no plaster ever fell of the ceiling.

To what uses might a restored Town Hall be put? There are many possible and it is likely it would be well used if it was available. The police office should be moved to a more visible location with parking available. The new vacant Dills Stationery Store with nearby parking would be ideal. Their quarters in the Town Hall could be turned into a combined meeting room and municipal museum. The Chamber of Commerce and the Agricultural Society have expressed interest in such a room. Other groups would also likely be interested in a central meeting room.

The upstairs Hall should be restored so it can be used for larger meetings, social events, or small theatricals. All of these could result in some revenue returning to

the Town from rentals. At present there is a shortage of licensable Hall space of moderate size in Acton. The Band Hall is booked for almost a year in advance and practical accommodation is limited to about 70 couples. The Legion Hall is too large for many groups. The Town Hall auditorium would be ideal for groups of 150 to 250 people.

In the not too distant future as Acton grows it is inevitable that there will be a Little Theatre group and a Choral Society. Both of these recreational activities will require, and be asking for, suitable rehearsal space. The Town Hall auditorium would be ideal for both of these activities. The acoustics are excellent and except for lighting the Town Hall stage is better appointed than any other stage at present in Acton. The new High School facility will be excellent but it is out of the way and will not be extensively available to outside groups because of demands on its use by the School. The most successful Little Theatre groups seem to

operate best in a rather independent setting and many of them generate a certain amount of revenue. The Town Hall auditorium would be ideal for small scale theatrical productions as well as rehearsals. In short we feel a restored Town Hall auditorium would be used fully, if not immediately, certainly in the near future.

In conclusion then we would like to suggest the following:

1) Set up a committee to investigate all aspects of restoration of the Town Hall in conjunction with the Ontario Heritage Foundation, said committee to report back to Council as soon as possible.

2) Begin Construction of the second storey of the Fire Hall making it visually compatible with the Town Hall facade.

3) Institute street parking restriction immediately to insure firefighter parking space availability.

4) Authorize the Parking Authority to begin investigating the purchase of property to the south of the Town Hall for municipal parking.

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Town Owned Property

The Council of the Corporation of the Town of Halton Hills invites sealed tenders, appropriately labelled "Tender for Block 'F', Plan M-132", to be delivered to the undersigned by Friday, May 20th, 1977, for the purchase of this residentially zoned parcel of land that will permit a single-family detached dwelling only. The property has a frontage of sixty-six (66) feet on the south side of Mary Street and a depth of one hundred and twenty (120) feet.

The highest or any tender will not necessarily be accepted.

Last date for receipt of tenders will be 12 NOON on Friday, May 20th, 1977. Tenders will be publically opened at that time.

Bids shall include a certified cheque of \$1,000.00 as bid deposit. The winning bid shall be confirmed by Council at their meeting of June 6th, 1977, or as close thereto as possible.

The winning bidder shall undertake to complete a formal "Offer to purchase" form within 24 hours of being advised of award. Such offer shall agree to a closing date of no more than 30 days after receipt of formal offer to purchase. Failure to comply with these terms is subject to forfeiture of deposit. All other deposits shall be returned immediately signed offer to purchase is accepted.

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