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Halton Hills hires heritage specialist

By Graeme Frisque
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Halton Hills council voted Monday (Jan 16) to retain a Heritage Specialist to consult and offer expert opinions on heritage property designations and renovations moving forward.

The firm of Spencer R. Higgins Architect Inc. will be contracted at an annual amount of \$49,100 (plus HST) to provide expert knowledge on required repairs and maintenance of heritage attributes on designated heritage properties, wrote the town in Monday's council package.

A sometimes contentious issue between property owners and laws aimed at protecting the heritage and character of Ontario communities, being classified as a heritage property can sometimes limit the options and scope of alterations available to owners.

We don't have anyone on staff (with that expertise), and through the province we're legislated to deem different areas as heritage, said Halton Hills Mayor, Rick Bonnette. It's sometimes contentious because people don't want to be listed. They are afraid it will prevent them from being able to make changes to their properties, he said, adding more often than not it's a misconception.

However, the mayor said in the cases where there are points of contention, the town is required to bring outside experts for a peer review, which costs money. Bonnette added about half the cases up for review end up being deemed non-heritage, and therefore the retention of an expert is aimed at avoiding these sometimes costly reviews where unnecessary.

Council deemed this was an important position and hired someone who can answer those questions and say no, that's not (heritage), said Bonnette. This is where the need comes in. I don't have any expertise in this and neither does council. Planners do the best they can but I think this is something that's long overdue.

While municipalities are able to impose their

own standards and regulations as it relates to heritage properties, the Ontario Heritage Act, originally enacted in 1975, sets a framework of basic standards by which municipalities must abide.

There are two types of heritage classifications listed and designated. In a brochure from Heritage Halton Hills, listed properties are described as having cultural heritage value or interest, but are not designated under the Ontario Heritage Act.

In such cases, property owners must give the municipality 60 days notice of any intention to demolish the property to give the town time to consider conservation options. Listed properties also do not require council's consent for any renovations or alterations in keeping with local bylaws.

Designated properties, on the other hand, cannot be torn down and require council's approval for alterations to heritage features.

The Heritage Halton Hills brochure, the full contents of which can be found online at halton-hills.ca/heritage/index.php, lists some common myths and misconceptions about what a heritage designation for property owners means.

Unless designated by the property owners themselves, as a rule, only outside features of a designated property are usually listed. Listed properties are also not automatically marked for designation, nor do they need to be listed prior to designation.

The organization adds even designation does not prevent homeowners from making changes to their properties, which in some cases are necessary for economic or structural viability. Its stated mandate is to, free of charge, advise owners on appropriate conservation and maintenance practices so that any changes respect the heritage value of the building.

The brochure also asserts that a designation does not make a given property less valuable or attractive in the marketplace, pointing out studies suggesting such properties can sometimes increase in value faster than similar, newer option and also better retain their value during market slowdowns.

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