

HOTEL NEVER GRANTED OFFICIAL HERITAGE STATUS

Continued from page 3

While the housing plan fits into the Town of Halton Hills' affordable housing agenda, it comes at the expense of local heritage.

The former site of the Exchange Hotel, 37 King St. in Georgetown, is slated to become affordable housing through Habitat for Humanity Halton-Mississauga-Dufferin (HHHMD).

"Six affordable housing units will be going up on this property," said Julie Watt, director of communications for HHHMD. "It's going to make a difference."

HHHMD plans to construct four townhomes and one semi-detached house for local families selected through local community groups, including Community Living North Halton.

So far, Habitat has invested more than \$1.4 million into the project, including the \$645,000 price of the property purchased in 2013.

Watt said, based on the current environment, \$4.2 million would still be required to con-

struct the homes. During the May 25 council meeting, Mayor Rick Bonnette expressed disappointment in delays and design issues.

"I'm disappointed," Bonnette told council. "We're going to support this project — yes — but it's how we got here that's disappointing."

Built in the 1850s by Georgetown's namesake and founder, George Kennedy, the Exchange Hotel was a stagecoach-style railway hotel, possibly the last in North America to still be situated beside an operational train station. In 2013, councillor Moya Johnson described the hotel as "one-of-a-kind."

A Heritage Halton Hills member, Doug Brock, known for restoring Glen Williams buildings to create the Williams Mill Visual Arts Centre, said in 2013, the Exchange Hotel was in better condition than the yellow building at the Williams Mill.

Despite efforts by Heritage Halton Hills to have the aging building designated as a heritage

building, after the previous owner applied for permission to demolish the structure, the hotel was never officially designated a heritage property nor listed on the town's Heritage Register.

When HHHMD purchased the property in 2014, the organization maintained its intentions were to preserve the original hotel.

"Traditionally with Habitat, we start fresh," John Gerrard, CEO of HHHMD at the time, said in 2018, "but in this case we made a promise to the town that we would work to keep the building as best as possible in its form."

A year later, in 2019, the hotel was demolished after preservation was deemed unfeasible by a heritage building consultant hired by the town. In the same year, the town agreed to waive development fees of up to \$250,000 for the project.

"I think Habitat got exactly what it wanted," Coun. Bryan Lewis told council at the May 25 meeting. "They got a piece of land with nothing on it."

Peter Roe, who had written an



Habitat for Humanity photo
Members of Habitat for Humanity Halton-Wellington-Dufferin break ground on the 37 King St. project.

op-ed in the Independent and Free Press urging council to save the hotel in 2013, echoed town council's frustration.

"My feeling — now that the Exchange is gone — is one of severe disappointment for the future of heritage in Georgetown," Roe said.

While a commemorative plaque will be installed on the property, the new structures will bear little resemblance to the Exchange Hotel. Some of the materials salvaged from the deconstruction will be reintegrated decoratively within the new homes.

"The townhouses should have had some reflection of the heritage of the site," Coun. Johnson said at the May 25 meeting. "They look like they're from Mississauga... they don't even fit in with the neighbourhood that is there."

However, Laura Loney, senior heritage planner for the town, said new construction should be of its own time to avoid creating a false sense of history.

"Since we're not dealing with a heritage property there is limited input we can have in terms of creating a heritage look and feel," Loney told council on May 25.

As of June, the project has received zoning approval and awaits site application and building permits.

There is no set date for construction, but fundraising is ongoing.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: After seven years, construction is set for affordable housing on the former site of the Exchange Hotel, which was demolished in 2019. We wanted to share what residents and councillors felt about how the project came to be and the loss of a piece of local heritage.

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