Downtown Oakville Heritage Conservation District: Study Update

Following the November 8, 2011 public meeting the Town of Oakville (together with the town’s consultants) hosted a series of four community focus group meetings in January 2012. The four interest groups represented residents, business, heritage and design professionals. The general purpose of the meetings was to discuss in greater detail some of the issues of district designation that had been identified in November. As an introduction to the community focus groups town staff identified three objectives that would help guide the group’s discussion as well as inform staff and the consultants:

- identify key issues;
- provide a forum for education and understanding; and
- enhance communication.

The Background Issues Identification report, based on the November 2011 public meeting and discussion, was used as a reference tool by the group to assist in re-examining critical issues. The report is available online at: http://www.oakville.ca/business/downtown-oakville-heritage-conservation-district-study.html

Town staff and the consultants presented the same background information to each group during the focus group meetings. The intent was to stimulate discussion amongst the group on a variety of key issues that would help town staff and the consultants to move forward with the study.

Town staff introduced the purpose of the meeting with an invitation for each group member to identify two or three critical issues. These were compiled by the consultants into a summary chart grouping together similar or like concerns.

The consultants followed up by providing an overview of how heritage conservation districts work (following the requirements of the Ontario Heritage Act) as well as in day-to-day practice in the Town of Oakville. An overview of the work program followed, highlighting the required contents for the Heritage Conservation District Study. The study’s anticipated completion is by the end of April 2012, with a presentation to Council before the summer break. Town staff emphasized that at the end of the study phase, Council will make a decision whether or not to proceed with the preparation of a heritage conservation district plan and guidelines.

Question and answer sessions ensued in all groups with three common themes identified regardless of the particular interests of each group:

- The need for an effective and speedy heritage permit approval process should a district be created.
- The potential for designation to adversely affect property values and discourage investment.
- The need to maintain a vibrant, healthy and economically viable downtown Oakville.

Related to some of these common themes, the groups also discussed the possibility of using other planning mechanisms that could promote the conservation of the character of Downtown Oakville, such as site plan approvals. Comparison with other communities and commercial heritage conservation districts was suggested as one way of identifying those things that worked well. Another alternative to designation was the potential to
consider a marketing strategy capitalizing on the area’s heritage character.

The need for heritage conservation policies and guidelines that provided clarity as well as opportunities for transparent and accountable decision making was also seen as being beneficial by all groups. The design professional group also posed questions about the role of existing contemporary buildings and the importance of new modern design.

What’s next and where do we go from here?

The consultants are proceeding with several components of the background study. Historical research is being undertaken to identify key historical themes in the development of the downtown from its early role as a harbour area through to the present day.

Complementing this research work, an inventory is also being undertaken to identify all those built features that are associated with these themes or of architectural value and contribute to the potential heritage character of the study area. This will also assist in identifying groups or concentrations of heritage resources. Together with the results of a streetscape and landscape inventory, this work will be key in deriving the boundaries of a potential heritage district.

The consultant team is also reviewing town policies that currently play a role in the development and appearance of the downtown study area. Of specific concern is to identify any potentially conflicting policies or practice that could make a heritage conservation district difficult to implement.

The results of this work will be collected into a heritage district study. The study will recommend whether district designation is warranted or supportable and what district boundary is appropriate, based upon the results of the historical research and inventory work. If designation is appropriate, the study will contain recommendations about future action such as proceeding with a district plan and providing direction on potential objectives and the scope of design guidelines.

A draft of the study will be presented first to the focus groups, likely as a single meeting with all the January participants attending and then proceed to a public meeting shortly afterwards with the community at large.

Information and updates regarding the Downtown Heritage District Study can be found on the town website here:


For further information please contact:

**Susan Schappert**  
Heritage Planner, District West/East  
Planning Services  
Town of Oakville  
| 905-845-6601, ext. 3870 | f: 905-338-4414 | [www.oakville.ca](http://www.oakville.ca)