

NOTL's heritage committee weighs in on Parliament Oak development – again

Evan Loree, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter The Lake Report

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Two Sisters Resorts Corp. has returned to the town with plans to pay tribute to the old Parliament Oak school – after it is torn down – but members of the heritage committee say the developer has left some key details out of its memorial plans.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake heritage committee advised council in April to deny a demolition permit to Two Sisters, which plans to build a controversial hotel on the site of the old school.

The committee got to see the memorial plans on Aug. 2 but some members were not wholly satisfied.

Committee member Amanda Demers said the planned memorial is “convenient” to the developer but is not what’s “best” for the site.

After almost an hour of discussion, the committee asked that the developer adjust the location of a commemorative wall it plans to erect on the hotel site, and include one other piece on the current site – a textual panel – in its preservation plan.

Council requested the developer consider preserving the entire school at a meeting in April.

However, the developer said in its revised heritage impact report that this would not meet the “aesthetic or functional requirements” of the proposed hotel.

Instead, Two Sisters Resorts Corp. proposes to retain some of the building's more important heritage features in their original spot or with a commemoration wall to be placed near the hotel's north entrance, facing Regent Street.

The proposed wall would include the school's sign, a stone mural of an oak tree and a concrete panel depicting one of Canada's first parliamentary meetings believed to have taken place on the site in 1793.

The panel portrays John Graves Simcoe, the first lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, presiding over an early parliamentary session in 1793.

The developer plans to salvage some of the school's bricks in the construction of the commemorative wall.

Also included in the plan are proposals to retain the Underground Railroad memorial, a town boundary stone and a historical stone tree marker placed in 1915.

Committee member David Snelgrove pointed out the application had not included plans to preserve a stone panel which describes the image of the parliamentary session from 1793.

"I feel personally that this is an error," Snelgrove said.

Lashia Jones, a heritage consultant hired by Two Sisters, explained this was because the description on the panel is inaccurate.

According to the commemoration report, which Jones signed, it is unlikely that Simcoe presided over a parliamentary session in 1793 as he and his wife were in Toronto at the time.

Furthermore, "Navy Hall served as the main parliament site of Upper Canada during this time," the report said.

However, at the meeting, Jones said she and the Two Sisters team were not disputing that a parliamentary session had taken place at the site of the old school, just that the dates were inaccurate.

She suggested the slab be given to the town or museum for preservation.

Committee member Alex Topps agreed with Snelgrove's suggestion that the descriptive slab be preserved in the commemoration wall.

He added the site of the wall should be closer to King Street, near where the parliamentary session apparently took place.

"I'm pleased that the bas relief panels are being preserved," committee member John Morley said.

He was more concerned about having a "rock-solid" tree preservation plan.

Stantec planner David Riley, who has been retained by Two Sisters, said the developer has provided a tree preservation plan.

According to an arborist's report, submitted with the original application in February, there are 46 trees on the property and the developer intends to preserve 26, remove 19 and transplant one.

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