

City of Peterborough seems to be abandoning history

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Site photograph The Pig's Ear Tavern building taken on Friday March 24, 2017 in Peterborough, Ont. The building and The Black Horse is one of the items coming up at council Monday for talk of giving them heritage designation. Clifford Skarstedt/Peterborough Examiner/Postmedia Network

City council seems ready to abandon any serious interest in preserving historic downtown buildings.

On Monday, council voted to drop all downtown sites from a list of 100 buildings city staff recommended be put on a heritage registry.

As protection goes a registry is weak medicine. If an owner of a registered building applied to tear it down the city would be informed and a 60-day waiting period would kick in.

That would give the city's heritage advisory arm a chance to review the circumstances. It might lead to an application to protect the building under the Ontario Heritage Act.

It could also lead to negotiations to do something short of actually demolishing the building while still improving or adding to it.

But registration is not designation. It could not force an owner to preserve the building.

So that's one indication of where council stands: the majority was not willing to take a baby step forward.

Indicator number two is that only a small number of core downtown buildings were in play. There were a total of six along Hunter & between Water and Aylmer streets and three on Water St., all in the block between Simcoe and Hunter streets. All three George St buildings were north of the core.

Larger buildings dropped from the registry include the original Quaker Oats factory and St. Paul's Presbyterian Church.

When council refuses even minor protection to those few buildings that heritage experts feel are most important alarm bells begin vibrate.

At least two councillors believe no level of preservation should be considered unless the building owners agree.

That issue - ownership or stewardship - ventures into the fundamental divide between preservation or not. Heritage buildings are either part of the civic fabric with an importance that goes beyond the current name on the deed, or just another piece of property any owner can freely alter or demolish.

Mayor Daryl Bennett's rationale for paring back the registry list was that nothing should be done until the broad issue of heritage policy is settled during the current Official Plan review.

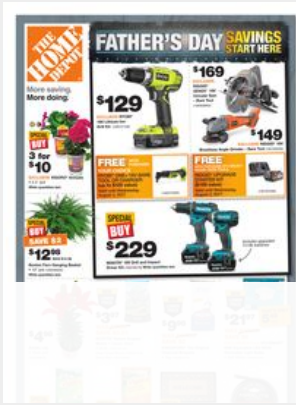
That review won't wrap up for at least a year. In the meantime downtown buildings could be approved for demolition without notice or discussion.

That happened recently with the architecturally significant Black Horse Pub building on George St. and the even older Pig's Ear Tavern building on Brock St. Neither has been torn down yet but both could be.

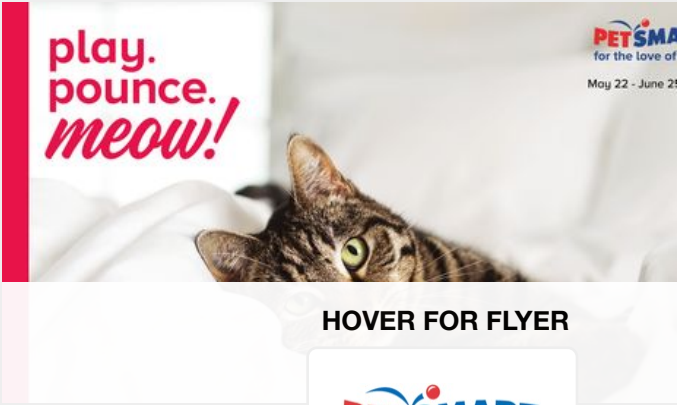
Granting the minor protection of a registry listing should have no effect on an Official Plan update - unless heritage preservation is going to be scaled back in the new plan.

That seems to be the message.

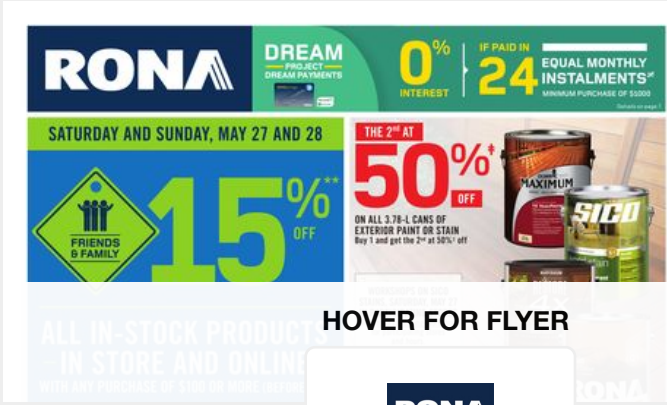
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