

# Heritage homes to be incorporated into commercial development

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Two of Scarborough's oldest homes could soon be part of a new mall in a city-backed compromise to stop local history from being demolished or moved away.

Landmark Canada Inc. is building The Landmark, one of largest condominium-style shopping centres in North America, on Steeles Avenue East west of Markham Road.

But The Landmark's 42-acre site contains two 19th Century homes: a mid-century Regency Cottage at 5951 Steeles called the William Stonehouse House and the Underwood House, a one-and-a-half storey Ontario Cottage at 5933 Steeles built around 1891.

At first, the developer wanted to be rid of both buildings.

"They initially came to me and said 'We're going to tear the one down and we don't have much use for the other one,'" said Ward 43 Councillor Paul Ainslie (Scarborough East), appointed as the caretaker councillor for Ward 41 last year when planning for the mall was in its final stages.

Instead, after both houses were added to the city's list of heritage properties, Landmark Canada embraced them as special features the mall could promote as attractions "to be appreciated" as part of The Landmark's second floor.

Though details must be agreed on, Landmark Canada wants to rebuild the houses in a way that would show mall visitors what 19th century life in Scarborough was like and architecture "very unique to that neighbourhood," Landmark Canada CEO Terry Yiu said.

"We find these houses were significant to the community," Yiu said this month, adding the developer will try to contact descendents of the original owners, asking for pictures that would tell the families' stories. "So far everyone seems to like the idea."

When the developer suggested the houses could be moved to a nearby park or to Markham's Heritage Subdivision, Ainslie suggested Landmark Canada look at how successfully BCE Place office complex in downtown Toronto incorporates a 19th century block of commercial buildings, including a Bank of Commerce branch now part of the Hockey Hall of Fame.

This week, he said such "adaptive re-use" of the homes is the best solution possible. "It's an example of preserving Scarborough's history and enclosing it in a mall does a lot to preserve it from the elements," Ainslie said.

Local archivist Richard Schofield, who supported heritage designations for the two Steeles Avenue houses as chairperson of the Scarborough Preservation Council, agrees. "The community will be brought back to life," he said.

The city determined the houses also have a "contextual value" as part of a group of heritage buildings in the area. Though he conceded that "nobody's going to want to live in a shopping plaza," Schofield said moving the houses far away, as the developer had once proposed, would strip them of their historical frame of reference.

"It just becomes another museum building," he said, noting Scarborough has already lost heritage buildings to the Markham Museum grounds, Black Creek Pioneer Village and a site in Pickering.

Both homes were named for families prominent in what was once called Armadale, a hamlet where an Underwood founded the Methodist Church and the Stonehouses were major farmers, said Schofield, adding a general store east of the houses operated until the 1960s and was later a restaurant called Devonsleigh Place.

Many heritage buildings in Scarborough haven't been as fortunate. There are around 70 designated buildings in Scarborough; a half-century ago there probably were 300 that would qualify, said Schofield.

Usually, "if there's a heritage building standing in the way, they bulldoze it first and ask questions later," he added.

Preservationists have complained the Ontario Heritage Act behind heritage designations is weak, arguing designated properties can still be torn down or left standing while their condition worsens, a process called "demolition by neglect."

City council next month will consider enforcing property standards in order to stop the loss of heritage features and ensure repairs are made.