

Bob Maton, PhD, President
Ancaster Village Heritage Community

Dear City Clerk:

I am writing in response to the Demolition Bylaw Presentation which is on the agenda for the Planning Committee meeting on April 25, 2022.

I think I speak for our membership and for Ancaster when I say thank you to city staff, the HMHC, Planning Committee, and to Jason Thorne and Alissa Golden in particular, for their efforts to address our concerns about the progressive losses of heritage buildings, both in Ancaster and around the city. Once gone, these precious buildings cannot be recovered. They are at the root of our identity as a community.

This explains the consternation, upset and anger in Ancaster when the 1860 Brandon House was demolished just over 2 years ago now. And added to that is the quiet demolition of the 1840 Marr House and Egleston House of similar vintage which until recently stood beside the stone-built Marr-Phillipo House still on the lot at Academy and Wilson Streets. I understand that the Marr House was built at least in part as a dwelling unit. The Egleston House certainly was. And so, like the Brandon House, neighbours should have been notified, and these should have gone to the Heritage Committee, to here at the Planning Committee, and then to council. When Cllr Ferguson nominated 40 pre-Confederation buildings on Wilson Street for inclusion on the Municipal Heritage Register after the Brandon House came down, 9 of them had already been quietly demolished. The character of our town, founded in 1792, is being radically changed from a heritage village to just another suburb of some major city.

Our residents are exerting increased vigilance to preserve our heritage in Ancaster. And we do battle to stop developers from turning our town into a miniature version of Toronto. The Ancaster Wilson Street Secondary Plan requires all development within the few blocks of Ancaster Village to conform to a heritage architectural style, and we support that provision fully. Current development proposals completely ignore that requirement, along with many other provisions in the bylaw.

On this briefing done by Alissa Golden, I think it's an excellent review of the current demolition bylaw and how it can be improved to protect valued and important buildings in the city.

First, the proactive strategy to encourage public participation in inventories of heritage buildings is an excellent idea. Twenty volunteers in Ancaster inventoried 110 pre-Confederation buildings in 2020, backed up by experts Alissa Golden from the city and Shannon Kyles from the Archaeological Conservancy of Ontario, and it worked very well. Next we hope to inventory buildings dating later than 1867 this coming summer, with a view to also placing them on the Municipal Register. This will give them 60 days' protection from demolition, and from there to be considered for designation.

On strengthening the language around “routine applications”, the definition of a “dwelling unit” needs stricter interpretation. A dwelling unit means a property that is used **or designed for use** as a domestic establishment. The Brandon House was built as a dwelling unit and had always been a dwelling unit, yet as I understand it was demolished so precipitately as a commercial operation because of zoning, which would appear to be a misapplication of the bylaws. As far as we know neither the Marr House nor the Eggleston House were ever considered by the city as dwelling units. Like the Brandon House, both historic buildings just disappeared one day from the streetscape on Wilson Street. In neither case had a building permit been applied for to replace these buildings.

On a statement of intent of the bylaw, missing in Hamilton, in Waterloo’s demolition policy it is expressly stated that the demolition control bylaw allows or enables the city to manage the demolition of residential units and maintain the integrity of neighbourhoods. It also prevents parcels of land from becoming vacant for long periods of time before new uses have been considered and constructed. Both are issues in Ancaster. We need such a statement of intent. It might change the way that demolitions are thought of and considered in the approval process.

I believe we also need to consider requiring plans for new construction to be submitted to the city before demolition of a historic building is permitted, whether it is on the Register or not, and that the demolition be considered as an integral part of the building application. This would fulfill the Waterloo intent to prevent lots from becoming vacant for long periods, while also ensuring that the building to be demolished would not provide dwelling units for people looking for a place to live.

The definition of what is “historic” would have to be worked on. We have suggested special notice be taken of buildings over 90 years of age. But we note that certainly, if measures to improve communication between Divisions via internal notifications is to happen at all, then some way of identifying what buildings are to be red-flagged needs to be developed, and that would most simply rely on the age of the building.

Thank you once again for listening to us, and for your efforts to help preserve our heritage.

Yours sincerely, Bob Maton