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Pape Avenue home receives heritage designation

Home was built in 1899 by William Harris

It took several years, but a descendant of one of Riverdale's first families is relieved to know the home of his ancestors will now be protected.

Jim Harris worked for five years to have the William Harris House at 450 Pape Ave. declared a heritage property. And on Thursday, Aug. 26, Toronto City Council did just that, and then went one step further and voted to approve a loan to purchase the property and turn it into affordable housing for artists in the area.

"I am very relieved that the home is now in the heritage property inventory because now I can rest a little more assured that the home will continue to stand," Harris said.

He was surprised council supported the nomination as during the process he said there were other parties who had issues with the nomination. The designation gives the property a legal protection under the Ontario Heritage Act and it means it can't be demolished or physically altered on the outside without the permission of the city.

Built by his great, great grandfather in 1899, Harris believes the home holds heritage value not just for its architectural elements, but also because of who built it. William Harris played a part in Toronto's industrial heritage starting several businesses including W. Harris Company and Harris Abattoir, a meat processing plant that became Canada Packers and then Maple Leaf Foods.

City Heritage Preservation staff agreed and recommended the property be designated because of its design value as an example of a home at the turn of the century; its associated link to William Harris, the Salvation Army and architect Henry Simpson; and its position as a landmark in the Riverdale community.

The Riverdale Historical Society was also concerned with the fate of the property after it was vacated, and member Gerald Whyte spoke at the Toronto and East York Community Council meeting in favour of its designation.

The Salvation Army took ownership of the property in 1930 and modified it over the years as a multi-residential facility. It was put up for sale last year, prompting Harris to increase his efforts to have it protected for fear a new owner would demolish the property.

Today it contains 38 small rooms of a rooming house nature and if converted to affordable housing for artists it would have 19 or so self-contained units with a purchase price of about \$100,000 each, according to staff.

Council approved the city's loan of \$1.9 million and up to \$275,000 for closing costs, understanding money would be available for it as cash in lieu of replacement of rental units approved for demolition in Ward 30.

Toronto-Danforth Councillor Paula Fletcher said the Salvation Army needs cash from the sale to pay down debt for its new Harbour Light centre, and this would maintain the "social purpose" the house has been put to since the 1930s.

Artist are some of the lowest-paid workers in the city, she said.

"This is a creative sector that needs housing. Most of it has been in the west end."

Not all councillors were in favour of the decision.

Etobicoke Centre Councillor Doug Holyday tried moving the original staff motion, which recommended the Salvation Army be encouraged to sell the building to an individual or organization that would continue its use for charitable or non-profit purpose. His motion failed.

While Harris is pleased with the city's decisions, he would also like to see the interior of the home protected as he said it is full of heritage details such as stained glass windows from England and four handmade fireplaces.

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