

An Open Letter to the Mayor and City Council
Re: Guelph's Cultural Heritage Action Plan
From: Virginia McDonald

Dear Mayor and Members of City Council:

You have two problems today and a last chance to solve them. You are poised to approve a flawed plan that will fail to protect Guelph's heritage. The plan was rejected by Guelph's own expert heritage advisory committee, Heritage Guelph, and by highly informed heritage community advocates.

Also, not only has the relationship between city staff and Heritage Guelph obviously and publicly soured and broken down, Heritage Guelph's leadership has just effectively packed its bag and slammed the door. Anyone who reads the local news and has followed the heritage issue can see that.

It was a mere 23 years ago that the city chose heritage as the context for all future development in downtown Guelph. Today's plan doesn't include the downtown. The reason given, that enough protection already exists, isn't true.

It took the destruction of Guelph's built heritage in the 1960s to launch the preservation efforts of the 1970s, which led to the city, in 1998, moving to protect downtown heritage.

In the big picture of Guelph's 194-year history, it would take you a comparative nanosecond to direct staff to spend a bit more time to fix the biggest problems with the proposed Cultural Heritage Action Plan.

It is tragic that Heritage Guelph has been sidelined and ignored when it comes to the final draft Cultural Heritage Action Plan. It is ludicrous that the chairperson of your own appointed expert committee had merely the allotted five minutes to comment publicly on a plan that's taken four years to prepare, and then mainly to explain why Heritage Guelph can't support it.

You already know the biggest problems with the plan. But there's been no action to adequately address them.

The plan does not adequately address the downtown – the city's core meticulously laid out by Guelph's founder John Galt. It does not address Catholic Hill. It does not adequately address indigenous cultural heritage, which was entirely left out until Heritage Guelph arguably shamed staff into including this. It does not address the lands around the former Guelph Correctional Centre. These are just the starting points.

Not only does the plan ignore the Ontario Heritage Act stipulations to define SIGNIFICANCE not RISK as benchmarks when it comes to identifying and protecting architectural, contextual or historically significant heritage features.

Council needs to examine how staff have boxed in Heritage Guelph by rewriting its terms of reference as an advisory committee. Just one example is that Guelph's Natural Heritage Committee is not even allowed to receive public delegates.

Council needs to ask why staff must agree to any motion Heritage Guelph wants placed on the city's agenda. It needs to let councillors once again sit on its own advisory committees.

The planning process, led by staff and out-of-town consultants, has squeezed out meaningful input by Heritage Guelph and the public from the outset. You'll recall as just one example, the plan's auspicious beginning, when it stated which said Guelph was located on the banks of the Grand River.

The plan still does not adequately address the downtown – the city's core meticulously laid out by founder John Galt. It still does not address Catholic Hill. It still does not adequately address indigenous cultural heritage, which was entirely left out until Heritage Guelph arguably shamed staff into including it. It overlooks the lands around the former Guelph Correctional Centre. These are just the starting points.

Maybe we should learn from our own local civic history. Rewind to the years 1960 to 1968, when all but two of heritage buildings were demolished in St. George's Square, along with the domed Carnegie Library and the family

home of Guelph-born and world famous Metropolitan Opera tenor Edward Johnson, all considered too costly to renovate.

Now listen to how retired City Of Guelph senior planner Norm Harrison described the wreckage.

Quote -“I often recall the flack we were getting from local businessmen . . . that we shouldn't be trying to protect all that junk from the late nineteenth century,” says Harrison, in a documentary called *Guelph, City Of Opportunity*, made to celebrate the city's 175th anniversary in 2000.

Twenty years later, the message in *City of Opportunity* is strongly relevant for Guelph's council and staff. The question today is, what kind of city will you pass on future generations, and what kind of civic legacy will you leave after you leave city council?

Your answer will decide whether Guelph be a city of opportunity, a city of missed opportunity, or just a city of opportunism.

Before you answer, consider how city founder John Galt's priority was – quote - “the creation of a community, not quick profits” and that Guelph was “one of the few planned communities in Canada,” - end quote.

The documentary backs up this statement with interviews from the communities top local historians and heritage experts.

Ironically, this documentary about Guelph from its birth until 2000 is preserved at Guelph Civic Museum, formerly the historic Loretto Convent. It was saved from demolition just 20 years ago.

Significantly it was saved only after the community as a whole – not just heritage advocates - rallied and engaged the city. So much for today's plan, which excludes Catholic Hill as already protected.

Also, *City of Opportunity* describes how Guelph possesses an intimacy and sense of place where historic steetscapes and landmarks, rather than

skyscrapers or the monsters of commerce, still dominate the skyline.

The documentary is also to be found at the Guelph Public Library. Half a century ago, city council of the day aimed the wrecking ball at the historic structure. For the past 40 years, subsequent councils have failed to rebuild it despite years of studies, plans and community support.

Finally, staff rationale on why Heritage Guelph's recommendations should be ignored include words like “unbudgeted” (always popular with elected officials) while city councillors use words like “lack of financial incentives” or “burden.” These are the type of linguistic crowbars used to wreck heritage buildings in the past.

Until he retired in 1995, senior city planner Norm Harrison witnessed the destruction of much of Guelph's historic streetscape in the '60s, the birth of Guelph's heritage movement in the 70s and proved himself to be a friend of preservation efforts.

In fact, Harrison himself saved Goldie Mill from the wrecking ball at the eleventh hour by showing how the ruins could be preserved as a historic landmark and still function as a community space. In it's heyday, Goldie Mill was used for film and dance festivals, performances, exhibits and film shoots.

In the documentary City Of Guelph, the city's longtime planner recalls the pressure developers directed at the city which led to the 1960s widespread heritage destruction and Harrison quotes the comment he remembers most about the long-vanished streetscape of St. George's Square. “It gives us a one-horse town look. We've got to get rid of it.”

That was then. What happens now? What reasons or excuses will future naysayers give city council for wrecking Guelph's Heritage, and which ones will the city listen to?

And as for protecting Guelph's heritage, how did we get in the position where we find ourselves now? The answer would seem to be one election and city staff turnover at a time.