

Staff Report



To	City Council
Service Area	Infrastructure, Development and Environment
Date	Tuesday, January 20, 2026
Subject	Designation of Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District

Recommendations

1. City Council, in accordance with Section 41 of the Ontario Heritage Act, designate by by-law the area shown on Attachment-1 to this report, as the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District.
 2. City Council adopt by by-law the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District Plan (Attachment-2) as the district plan for the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District.
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Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with staff's recommendations on the proposed designation of the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District (HCD) and that the Downtown Heritage Conservation District Plan be approved. The report provides a background on the work completed to date, a summary of consultation and engagement activities, the feedback received and action taken in response to comments and concerns raised.

Key Findings

- This project includes both a Study Phase and a Plan Phase
 - The Study Phase assessed whether the study area should be designated as an HCD and proposed a district boundary.
 - Within the study area boundary 160 parcels were surveyed and evaluated for cultural heritage value.
 - Under the Ontario Heritage Act, 25% of properties within the boundary of the district must meet at least two criteria from Ontario Regulation 9/06.
 - The study found that 112 parcels (approximately 70%) met at least two of the criteria.
 - Based on analysis conducted, the study area contained sufficient cultural heritage value to be considered for Part V designation under the Ontario Heritage Act.
 - Phase 1 and the proposed boundary for the District were supported by Council September 4, 2024 and staff were directed to proceed to Phase 2 of the project, the preparation of an HCD Plan and Guidelines for Downtown Guelph.

- The drafting of a plan for the district has included a robust consultation and engagement program and a multi-phase draft process.
- The conservation and celebration of cultural heritage resources is essential to sustainable development and can contribute to the social, environmental and economic health of the city.
- The designation of the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District and adoption of the plan and guidelines has multiple benefits including:
 - Recognizing, celebrating and enhancing the aspects of the downtown core that the community has identified as important and that contribute to and can sustain a strong sense of place;
 - Enabling City Council to manage and guide prescribed growth and change in the District;
 - Establishing and offering clear tools and a level of certainty to property owners, developers and business owners to guide the design of key streets, intersections, open spaces, and buildings within Downton Guelph.
 - The HCD Plan offers clear direction to properties that contribute to the cultural landscape of the district, those that do not explicitly contribute to the district's overall expression of cultural heritage value and properties adjacent to the district's boundary.
- Council approval is required to proceed with the passing of the designating by-law and adoption of the heritage conservation district plan.

Strategic Plan Alignment

The key findings and recommendations of this report align with the 2024-2027 Strategic Plan priority 6.1.4 to conserve our cultural heritage resources.

Future Guelph Theme

City Building

Future Guelph Objectives

City Building: Grow and care for our community space and places

Financial Implications

No financial implications are associated with a decision to proceed with the staff recommendation. The total combined cost of Phase 1 (Study Phase) and Phase 2 (Plan Phase) is just over \$200,000 and this is funded through the capital budget.

Report

The provincial government's [More Homes Built Faster Act](#), 2022, significantly changed the function of municipal heritage registers in Ontario. As a result, all properties currently listed on the Municipal Register of Cultural Heritage Properties must be removed by January 1, 2027. Approximately 1,700 properties will lose their heritage status, representing over 80% of Guelph's cultural heritage resources.

Location

The Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District boundary, as established in the Study Phase of the project is broadly bounded by Norfolk St. to the west, the

Speed River to the east, Fountain St. E. to the south and the intersection of Norfolk St. and Woolwich St. to the north (see Attachment-1).

Background

In June 2021, Council approved the recommendations of the [Cultural Heritage Action Plan](#) which included the priority: "For Old Downtown, undertake a comprehensive strategy, including community consultation, to direct future cultural heritage conservation efforts and planned change" (Page E-7).

The establishment of heritage conservation districts is a strategy for heritage conservation that has become widely used in Ontario municipalities since 1980 with 134 approved district plans in full force as of March 2020. A HCD designation enables Council to manage and guide future change in the district through the adoption of a district plan with policies and guidelines for conservation, protection and enhancement of the area's special character. Under Part V Section 41.1 (5) of the Ontario Heritage Act a heritage conservation district plan (see Attachment-2) shall include,

- A statement of the objectives to be achieved;
- A statement explaining the cultural heritage value or interest;
- A description of the heritage attributes of the district and properties in the district;
- Policy statements, guidelines and procedures for achieving the stated objectives and managing change in the district;
- A description of the alterations or classes of alterations that are minor in nature and that the owner of property in the heritage conservation district may carry out without obtaining a permit.

Objectives of the Heritage Conservation District

The overall objective for the Downtown Guelph HCD is the protection, conservation and management of its heritage attributes and contributing properties in the context of prescribed and anticipated future growth of the area so that the District's cultural heritage value is sustained in the long term.

The Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District is significant for its design, historical, and contextual values. The radial town plan was conceived by John Galt in 1827. This plan shaped the downtown core's distinctive street layout, triangular lotting patterns and large civic spaces. Anchored by the Speed River, an essential feature to human habitation for centuries, the district reflects Guelph's growth from the arrival of the railway in 1856 into the early 20th century, with an exceptional concentration of stone and brick commercial, civic, institutional, and industrial buildings. The original radial plan, extending from the site of the first tree felled, provides a strong sense of identity and continuity and the area's historic fabric expresses its evolution as a thriving urban centre.

Consultation and Engagement

Under the Ontario Heritage Act, the consultation required before a by-law designating a heritage conservation district and adopting a HCD plan is made includes:

- Information relating to the proposed HCD plan, including a copy of the plan is made available to the public (September 18, 2025).

- At least one public meeting is held with respect to the proposed heritage conservation district plan (October 15, 2025)
- The heritage advisory committee is consulted with respect to the proposed plan (February 20/September 4/December 4, 2025)

Community engagement is integral to the success of an HCD plan. People who live and work in the area can identify important characteristics of the area and elements that should be retained, enhanced and celebrated. Consultation also allows members of the community to express views on what new development within the district could look like and how best to implement recommended policies and guidelines.

The Downtown Guelph HCD project was carried out in two phases: A plan phase and a study phase. The engagement program for the Plan Phase (2024-2025) built on the robust engagement program that played a key role in the Study Phase (2023-2024). Engagement opened lines of communication, built relationships and encouraged active discussions with property owners, residents and community members. It also provided opportunities to participate in the process and offer comments and feedback. Physical mailouts were done at several steps in the project. Approximately 800 notices were mailed to property owners and residents within the proposed boundary to notify them of upcoming open houses, council meetings and the October 2025 statutory public meeting. The project was also shared at several points in the project timeline through the City's social media accounts and is available for review and feedback through the City's Have Your Say platform until January 20, 2026, Council decision meeting. In addition to social media promotion, online channels and physical mail-outs, meetings and workshops were conducted with the following groups:

Phase 1

- Heritage Advisory Committee – September 18, 2023
- Public Open House with walking tour – October 8, 2023
- Downtown H.C.D. Focus Group – November 6, 2023
- Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation – November 27, 2023
- Heritage Advisory Committee – January 29, 2024
- Downtown H.C.D. Focus Group – February 5, 2024
- Downtown Guelph Business Association – February 28, 2024
- Council Planning meeting – September 4, 2024

Phase 2

- Public Open House notice mailout – January 1, 2025
- Public Open House – January 29, 2025
- Downtown Coordination Staff Group – February 12, 2025
- Accessibility Advisory Committee – February 18, 2025
- Heritage Advisory Committee – February 20, 2025
- Downtown H.C.D. Focus Group – February 27, 2025
- Public Open House notice mailout – April 14, 2025
- Downtown H.C.D. Focus Group (makeup) – April 28, 2025
- Downtown Guelph Business Association – April 30, 2025
- Public Open House – May 7, 2025
- Internal staff review of the draft plan – July 2025
- Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation review of the draft plan – August 2025

- Heritage Advisory Committee – September 4, 2025
- Downtown Coordination Staff Group – September 10, 2025
- Public release of the draft plan – September 18, 2025
- Public Meeting notice mailout – September 23, 2025
- Downtown Guelph Business Association – September 24, 2025
- Public Meeting – October 15, 2025
- Economic Development and Tourism Advisory Committee – November 12, 2025
- Heritage Advisory Committee – December 4, 2025

At the [December 4, 2025 meeting of the Heritage Advisory Committee](#), the Committee passed the following motions:

1. That the Heritage Advisory Committee advises City Council that the potential district identified in Phase 1 of the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District project merits designation under Part V of the Ontario Heritage Act AND,
2. That the Heritage Advisory Committee advises City Council that the committee endorses the heritage information, attributes and approach recommended in the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District Plan (draft prepared by Archaeological Services Inc. – Nov 25, 2025) and in the report titled “Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District Plan – Draft Designation Report.”

Responding to Feedback

The following summarizes the core and frequently shared comments from residents (public, property owners, business owners, staff, advisory committee members) on the proposed HCD Plan. Feedback was received throughout the project consultation and through delegates and written submissions to the Statutory Public Meeting on October 15, 2025. Feedback was focused on the following:

- Increases in insurance premiums
- Heritage permit process
- Impacts on property values
- Maintenance and length of time for repairs
- Restricting demolition
- Restricting height

A summary of feedback and responses is summarized below.

Insurance

Comment:

Frequent comments were made that property owners within a Heritage Conservation District would experience increases in property insurance premiums due to a property becoming designated under the Ontario Heritage Act. There was also a concern that property owners would not be able to obtain property insurance.

Response:

The provincial government advises that [property insurance premiums should not go up](#) because of heritage designation. Factors such as building age, materials and outdated systems play a larger role in an insurer’s calculations. A small number of residents (4 responses) in the Brooklyn and College Hill Heritage Conservation

District satisfaction survey reported that they have seen increased premiums due to their location within a district.

To help mitigate any potential impacts on property insurance, staff had conversations with the Insurance Bureau of Canada and conducted an informal survey of local insurance providers and brokers. This information allowed for the development of a Heritage-friendly Insurance Brokers and Companies list (see Attachment-3) to be developed and added to the City's heritage planning public resources.

The City's heritage designation by-laws have been updated to offer clear guidance and obligations for insurers in the case of accidental partial or full loss of a designated heritage asset.

Nothing in this by-law shall be interpreted to require the replication, replacement, or restoration of designated heritage attributes in the event of partial or total loss due to unintentional fire, flood, natural disaster, or other insured peril. The property owner retains the right to rebuild or repair using contemporary materials and methods, provided that any proposed alterations to surviving heritage attributes are reviewed and approved in accordance with the Ontario Heritage Act. This by-law does not impose additional obligations on insurers, nor does it mandate the use of historic materials or construction techniques unless voluntarily undertaken by the owner. The municipality commits to timely review of heritage permit applications related to insurance claims to avoid undue delay in claim resolution.

Heritage planning staff are in ongoing conversation with insurers to continue to help address misconceptions and misinformation around heritage insurance.

Heritage Permit Process

Comment:

Concerns were expressed that the need to apply for and be granted a heritage permit would add cost and time to any proposed projects.

Response:

Heritage permits are a parallel process to a building permit and there is no cost to submit a heritage permit application. Property owners who plan to propose alterations to properties within the HCD are encouraged to first consult the HCD Plan and then contact Heritage Planning staff. Pre-consultation is an important preliminary step in the heritage permit process that can create efficiencies and helps improve outcomes.

Permits fall into 1 of 3 streams, minor, major, and new construction/demolition. To ensure permits are addressed quickly, minor permits are reviewed by heritage planning staff and approved by the General Manager of Planning and Building Services. Major permits are reviewed by heritage planning staff and the City's Heritage Advisory Committee and approved by the General Manager of Planning and Building Services. New Construction and/or Demolition are reviewed by heritage planning staff and the Heritage Advisory Committee, but these permit decisions are made by Council. According to the City of Guelph's Heritage Permit Application Guide, the timelines for each type of application are:

- Minor: 10-15 business days

- Major: 15-45 business days
- New Construction and/or Demotion: must be done within 90 calendar days

From 2020 to 2025, heritage planning staff processed 9 minor permits, 25 major permits and 3 New Construction and/or Demolition permits and had an average turnaround time of approximately 20 days.

Under the Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District Plan, many alterations including interior renovations, stabilization of vacant and damaged heritage properties, repairs to building elements with the same style, materials, size, shape, detailing, replacement or addition of exterior building elements in the same style, materials, size, shape and detailing, and many exterior accessibility upgrades are exempt from heritage permits.

Impacts on Property Values

Comments:

Several residents voiced concerns about the potential impact of heritage designation on the value of their individual properties.

Response:

There is a growing body of evidence showing that there is often a small, but noticeable connection between formally designated heritage properties and their property values, whether that is through the maintenance of their value in market downturns or a small premium in their eventual sale price. A report titled [Investigating the Impact of Heritage Property Designation on Real Estate Value](#) was prepared for the City of Hamilton's Planning and Economic Development Department in 2023. Assessing a sample size of 208,112 property sales in the region between 1983 and 2022, it showed that designated heritage properties are listed far less frequently, with only 222 sold in that period. It also showed a strong positive association between heritage designations and sale prices.

Maintenance Costs and Length of time for Repair

Comments:

Residents have commented that the introduction of heritage permitting requirements for minor alterations including painting of non-original buildings components (e.g. Windows, doors, eaves) will increase the time it takes to make the repairs and the costs associated.

Response:

Many exterior maintenance and alterations including repair activities like repainting exterior elements including doors, eaves, windows are exempt from requiring a heritage permit.

Restricting Demolition

Comments:

The designation of a Heritage Conservation District and the policies within the plan would be used to stop demolition.

Response:

Demolition is permitted within the Heritage Conservation District but would require the proponent to apply for and be granted a demolition permit.

Restricting Height

Comments:

Concerns were stated about the District Plan conflicting with the Downtown Secondary Plan and specifically with the increased permitted building heights through Official Plan Amendment 106 (OPA 106). As well concerns were expressed that the District Plan may be used to suppress building heights.

Response:

The District Plan works in tandem with the Downtown Secondary Plan. There is no language in the District Plan to prohibit or restrict the building heights permitted in OPA 106. The District Plan contains policies, guidelines and visualizations to offer clear direction on how height increases and heritage fabric can be integrated. The Plan also offers clarity for vacant or non-contributing properties on how height can be used to enhance surrounding heritage fabric.

Next Steps

The designation of Downtown Guelph's commercial core as a heritage conservation district will support the protection, conservation, and management of its heritage attributes. It will offer clear direction and guide prescribed and anticipated future growth of the area so the District's cultural heritage value is enhanced and sustained in the long term.

If Council passes the associated Downtown Heritage Conservation District by-law, notice will be served on each property owner located within the proposed heritage conservation district, on the Ontario Heritage Trust and will be published in a municipal newspaper. Once the notice is published, a 30-day appeal period begins.

If no notice of appeal is received, the by-law comes into force the day following the last day of the appeal period.

Attachments

Attachment-1 Downtown Heritage Conservation District Boundary

Attachment-2 Draft Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District Plan

Attachment-3 Heritage-Friendly Insurance Brokers and Companies

Attachment-4 Staff Presentation

Attachment-5 Draft By-law Number (2026) – 21187 Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District

Departmental Approval

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