

Pier Group report finds pier buildings a great opportunity for Port Hope

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PORT HOPE -- A revitalization study of Port Hope's centre pier, which called the factories the greatest redevelopment opportunity in the municipality's history, was presented to council on Oct. 27.

"You have an opportunity here that's going to be squandered if you take those buildings down," said Doug Simpson, from NetGain Partners Inc., who prepared the revitalization study for the Pier Group.

The group has been working to change the municipality's decision to demolish the industrial buildings on the centre pier as part of a revised waterfront. The municipality plans to tear down the pier buildings as part of the clean-up of low-level radioactive waste (LLRW) in Port Hope over the next 10 years. The buildings have been used for years to store waste.

In January, the Pier Group released a heritage assessment that found the pier buildings were an asset worth saving.

The new study stated the existing buildings, if restored, would complement the rest of the redesigned waterfront, add potential uses, and provide year-round facilities and economic benefits. The economic study was funded by a grant from the Port Hope Branch of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario.

"Passive parks have no opportunity to capture revenue, basically it's an ongoing expense for the municipality," said Mr. Simpson.

The report made three recommendations - keep the buildings in a state of good repair; create a committee to manage the adaptation and reuse with the least possible risk to the municipality; and a phased-in approach to reuse.

Phase one would be development of ground floor commercial services to waterfront park users - food and beverage services and boating/fishing retail stores. Leasing retail space between three or four commercial operations could bring in \$550,000 per year, according to the report.

Phase two would be renovating Building 40, which is 25,000 square feet, for another use, such as an indoor sports facility, or trade show venue.

Phase three would be finding long-term large institutional tenants for the buildings. A big institution, like a community college or public and voluntary sector organizations, would make the project financially stable.



Peg McCarthy/Northumberland News

Christopher Wallace is the chairman of The Pier Group, a newly-formed citizens' group that wants to see the old buildings on Port Hope's central pier restored.

"None of these things are really cost intensive, they're really just about time," Mr. Simpson told council.

Councillor David Turck told the group that if they wanted to save the pier buildings they need to find entrepreneurs willing to invest in the buildings and not rely on municipal funding.

"I find myself looking at a business wish rather than a business plan," said Coun. Turck. "We need entrepreneurs and a bona fide business plan."

Chris Wallace, co-chair of the Pier Group, has said it is impossible to find business people willing to commit to a site that is slated for demolition.

"Nowhere in our report do we suggest the municipality foot the bill," added Mr. Simpson.

The economic study recommends Port Hope hold the mortgage for the pier redevelopers and if the money is not paid down, the property will revert back to the municipality.

Council sent the report on to the Harbour Commission, which owns the waterfront property.

"The cost to maintain the buildings and the risk factors are all factors that council and the Harbor Commission have taken into consideration," said Mayor Linda Thompson.

The commission is a private organization made up of council members and two citizens. For years, the meetings have been off-limits to the public because it is considered a private organization. The commission's meetings are expected to be opened to the public in 2010 after an independent legal review found they should no longer be behind closed doors.

The Pier Group is hosting a speakers night at the Cameco Capitol Arts Centre on Thursday, Nov. 19, at 7:30 p.m. Tim Jones, director of Artscape, Toronto, will be the keynote speaker. Artscape has successfully reused historic buildings to support creative business and re-invigorating communities. Gord Hume, chair of the municipal cultural planning partnership, is one of the leading pioneers of the 'Creative City' movement in Canadian municipal government.

A community input workshop will be held on Saturday, Nov. 21, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Knights of Columbus Hall, to gather public opinion on possible reuses for the buildings.

"There are a lot of people in town who believe that a well-restored pier might be wonderful. They're just afraid it can't be done. We want to bring in people who say, yes it can be done," said Mr. Wallace.