



MEMORANDUM

TO: Heritage Markham Committee

FROM: Regan Hutcheson, Manager-Heritage Planning

DATE: March 12, 2025

SUBJECT: Information
A History of the Heritage Markham Committee

Project: 50th Anniversary Project – History of the municipal heritage advisory committee

Background:

- The first version of this document (attached) was originally prepared for the 25th anniversary in 2000 and has been updated for the current anniversary celebrations. It was available at the Heritage Week display.

Status/ Staff Comment

- It is being provided so that current Committee members can learn more about the growth and development of the Committee over the last 50 years.

Suggested Recommendation for Heritage Markham

That Heritage Markham receive as information the document titled “A History of the Heritage Markham Committee”.

File:Q:\Development\Heritage\HERITAGE MARKHAM FILES\50th Anniversary 2025\Heritage Markham Memo and Extracts\HM march 12 2025 History of Committee.doc

A History of the Heritage Markham Committee



In 1975, the newly proclaimed Ontario Heritage Act encouraged municipalities to create local heritage advisory committees to assist in the conservation of the province's heritage resources at a local level. In Markham, a Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACAC) was created by Council on October 28, 1975.

The inaugural meeting

The first meeting of the Committee was held on November 17, 1975, at the municipal offices in Buttonville. The Committee consisted of six members of the community and an observer from the Society for the Preservation of Historic Thornhill. One of the first actions of the new committee was to recommend that Council support the placing of plaques on buildings of significant heritage merit. It is amusing to note that the minutes of the meeting indicate that the Committee agreed that all future meetings should be no longer than two hours in duration. Given the often-complex work undertaken by the Committee since that first meeting, it has been a challenge to achieve that objective!

As the first Chairman of the Committee stated:

"There was so much to do that it was hard to know where to start. Clearly a survey was needed and was started, but our attention was often diverted by crises. We puzzled extensively over the technical meaning of designation, how it was to be done, especially the designation of a whole area...It was exciting and often puzzling at the same time."

So where do we go from here

By January of 1976, the Committee requested that Council appoint six more members and approve a budget of \$9070. Both requests were fulfilled. To address the daunting amount of work, the Committee formed four sub-committees: Inventory, Designation, Inspection and Negotiations.

These early members were true pioneers as they tackled these unfamiliar tasks. What this diverse group of men and woman had in common simply was a desire to protect those special heritage features and buildings in their community that previous generations had left behind. Visible, solid and tangible guideposts from the past - finite resources that once gone cannot be replaced, and only remain in photographs and our memories.

One of the first tasks of the new Committee was to begin to create an inventory of heritage buildings and to identify those buildings in the community which should be officially designated under the Ontario Heritage Act. The Committee's first inventory, completed in 1976, included some 500 buildings and was organized according to the areas of early settlement in Markham Township. Subsequent inventories were published in 1981, 1987, 1991 and in 2008 the inventory became the City's official Register of Property of Cultural Heritage Value or Interest.

Another important task of the early members of the Committee was heritage conservation education. Many volunteer hours were spent undertaking public relations and promotion with not only the general public but with owners of properties being considered for designation. The

Committee also produced heritage walking tour brochures for Markham, Thornhill and Unionville, as well as participating in various community events to raise awareness.

In the early years, the Committee met at the municipal offices in Buttonville. By 1980, the Committee had moved to the upstairs meeting room at Crosby Arena in Unionville. This space provided the much-needed work area for summer students hired by the Committee over the years. When the Committee's staff became part of the Planning Department in 1988, the Committee returned to the municipal offices.

In the late 1970's, the Committee used the services of part-time researchers. In 1977, a heritage planner was hired by the committee to provide organizational and administrative assistance. In 1979-80 this position became known as the Executive Assistant (part time). As budgets permitted, heritage researchers were hired on a contract basis. Over the years, Heritage Markham also benefited from the talents of countless summer students and co-op students working on specific projects. In 1986, the Executive Assistant position became the Executive Director which later became the Heritage Coordinator responsible for the Heritage Section of the Planning Department. In 1989, Council approved the creation of a full-time Heritage Researcher position. In the 1990's, the Heritage Coordinator became the Senior Planner- Heritage and Conservation and the Researcher became Planner- Heritage and Conservation.

Early battles and victories

In July 1977, the first eight letters of intent to designate properties were sent out. The first major battle of the Committee appears to have been the designation of the Wedding Cake House in Markham Village. A hearing before the province's Conservation Review Board resulted in the designation of the property.

By 1979, eighteen properties had been designated. The Committee was still attempting to work out a working relationship with the Planning Department and find a means by which applications affecting heritage properties would be consistently forwarded to the Committee. The Committee was also having problems with registering approved property designations and was attempting to have the Town's Legal Department prepare the actual designation bylaws and legal descriptions. Other early issues included the design of a heritage designation plaque and the Unionville By-pass OMB Hearing.

In 1980, Mayor Roman asked for the Committee's assistance in establishing a heritage fund to assist designated properties. This led to the creation of the Markham Heritage Loan Fund which offered low cost loans for heritage restoration projects. The year 1980 also saw the introduction of a building evaluation rating system, and a new Committee logo design by Lillian Brown. The logo (as illustrated on this brochure) is a traditional symbol of good luck and is found on several Markham heritage buildings.

1980 was also the year, on October 15th, that the Markham LACAC officially became 'Heritage Markham'.

In 1981, Heritage Markham requested that it be notified of all applications for building and demolition permits of buildings within heritage conservation study areas in addition to those on the inventory. It is from this early seed that later committees had the opportunity to review all types of planning applications in these special areas. The Committee was also continuing to work on the creation of formal heritage conservation districts in Unionville and Thornhill.

Heritage Markham also worked with other community organizations including the Vaughan LACAC, local historical societies and the Main Street Unionville Merchants Association (MUMA). In fact in 1982, the Unionville Preservation Committee (UPC) was formed consisting of Heritage Markham and MUMA representatives to provide recommendations on parking, underground servicing and other related issues affecting historic Unionville.

The early seeds of Markham's innovative heritage subdivision

It was also in 1982 that the first seed for the future Markham Heritage Estates subdivision was planted. Staff was requested to determine if the Town owned any property off Main Street Unionville near Toogood Pond suitable for the relocation of heritage buildings. Two years later at a meeting of Heritage Markham, land east of Highway 48, north of 16th Avenue next to a storm water retention pond was considered as a site that could be used to create 16-24 lots for heritage buildings which require relocation. It was thought that threatened buildings could be relocated, restored, renovated and sold for modern living. By the late 1980's these early dreams were realized with the opening of Canada's first heritage subdivision located to the west of the Markham Museum. Heritage Markham continues to advise Council on building eligibility and lot selection, and works with applicants on restoration, appropriate additions and historic landscape treatment.

The Committee continued to assist property owners with technical advice on individual applications while at the same time addressed major concerns such as the proposed disposal of the Locust Hill and Unionville Train Stations. Through the work of the Committee, the Unionville station was later saved by the Town and fully restored in 1989 using municipal and provincial funding.

By 1985, Heritage Markham had encouraged Council to designate over 50 individual heritage properties and its building inventory and designation reports were cited as models for other LACACs by the Ministry of Culture.

District designation - for some but not for all

The Committee was not only interested in individual property designations but also was actively promoting the designations of special heritage areas called heritage conservation districts (HCDs). Council, on the advice of Heritage Markham, had already officially identified the older components of Markham Village, Unionville and Thornhill as areas to be examined as future heritage conservation districts in September 1976, and Buttonville was later included in October 1986.

In 1986, after much work, the Thornhill Heritage Conservation District was approved as Markham's first HCD. Work then began on a district for Buttonville and Markham Village. The Buttonville HCD Study was completed in 1988 but never implemented as it was premised on the introduction of a by-pass road. A later re-examination of the Buttonville situation resulted in Markham's fourth district in 2011. In 1989, funding was secured to hire consultants to prepare the Markham Village HCD Study. The District Plan was approved by Council in May 1990 and by the OMB in October 1991. Heritage Markham volunteers worked for many years on developing a heritage conservation district plan for Unionville. Later that decade, the Unionville HCD was prepared by staff and approved in 1998. In 2008, a new Thornhill HCD Plan was approved after being extensively reviewed and updated. The Victoria Square community was also studied as a potential HCD in the 2010s but was not pursued. In all these studies, Heritage Markham was an active participant.

With the creation of districts, detailed plans were adopted to preserve and enhance these areas by providing policies for both public and private sector restoration and redevelopment, and Heritage Markham through its review function, was responsible for ensuring compliance with these documents.

The tools of heritage conservation

The latter part of the 1980's saw the introduction of several important policy initiatives. In 1986, the completion of the Town's Archaeological Master Plan allowed the Committee to identify known archaeological sites and recommend where further investigations should occur. In 1985-86, the Committee formed a Sign Sub-Committee and became actively involved in the creation of the Town's new sign by-law, which included the identification of four special sign districts and the introduction of sympathetic policies. A new Site Plan Control By-law in 1986 allowed Heritage Markham to review detailed elevations of residential construction in the HCDs.

In 1988, the Committee was concerned about the growing loss of heritage structures in areas being developed. Council introduced Heritage Letters of Credit whereby in all subdivision agreements and site plan/development agreements in which a heritage structure is to be retained, a financial security can be taken to protect the building. In 1989, Heritage Markham requested that any monies obtained from a heritage letter of credit be used for heritage purposes. A Heritage Reserve Fund was later created in 1991 for the deposit of cashed Heritage Letters of Credit with the monies to be used for heritage projects in the community.

Abandonment and illegal demolition of rural heritage buildings has been a major concern of the Committee since the late 1980's. In 1989, Council approved a by-law to require the boarding of abandoned and vacant buildings. In addition, a by-law to designate the entire Town as an area of demolition control was enacted that required all residential demolitions to be approved by Council and substantially raised the fine for illegal demolitions. In later years, the Committee advocated for and achieved enhanced heritage policies in the City's Keep Markham Beautiful By-law and the Property Standards By-law.

Special legislation for Markham

To further support the preservation of designated buildings, Markham in conjunction with its local M.P.P. Don Cousens were successful in having the Ontario Heritage Act amended in 1991 to obtain special demolition control legislation for our community. The Town of Markham Act, 1991 allowed Council to refuse to issue a demolition permit for a designated structure or a structure in a heritage district for 180 days and not until a building permit to erect a new building on the same property was obtained. In response, the province later introduced permanent demolition protection for all designated properties in the Ontario Heritage Act.

Improvements for the 1990's

The 1990's saw Heritage Markham attempting to improve the administration of the Town's heritage conservation program. In 1990, the Thornhill Heritage Conservation District Advisory Committee was amalgamated with Heritage Markham to provide one Town-wide heritage voice. To formalize its administrative affairs, an operational by-law for Heritage Markham was drafted in 1991 and received Council's endorsement. Also in 1991, Council adopted the comprehensive document entitled "Evaluating Heritage Resources in the Town of Markham" and created a Building Evaluation Committee comprised on Heritage staff and two representatives of Heritage Markham to undertake the heritage property classification work program.

To help streamline the approval process, Council delegated several of its review powers. In 1991, Council resolved that where Heritage Markham Committee had recommended approval of construction within its jurisdiction, that the requirement for Council approval be delegated to Town staff for signs, minor alterations and additions not subject to site plan control. Later, in 1993, Council further streamlined the process by delegating the approval of non-controversial building, sign and heritage permits on behalf of Heritage Markham to Heritage staff. In later decades, further delegation would occur.

Heritage Markham members have always had to be aware of a vast array of heritage related policies and procedures. These have originated from both the provincial government and the Ontario Heritage Foundation, and the Town/City of Markham through Official Plan, Secondary Plans, Heritage Plans, by-laws and council resolutions. In 1994, Heritage Markham adopted a Policy Manual that compiled all relevant heritage policies and common procedures in one convenient, easy-to read document. Given that the Committee often changes composition on an annual basis, this document was used as both an educational tool for new members and a handy reference source for existing members. It also resulted in consistent decision-making over time.

2000 onward - a new millennium of successes and challenges

Since 2000, Heritage Markham has been instrumental in the success of many heritage programs, policies and events in the community including:

- Doors Open Markham event since 2003 – highlighting heritage resources
- Heritage Awards of Excellence program starting in 2000 as part of Heritage Markham's 25th anniversary and continuing to acknowledge exceptional heritage projects and the people responsible
- Markham Remembered Plaque Program – to educate and celebrate
- Grant and Financial Assistance Program for Heritage Properties
- Heritage District specific entry signage and street name signs
- Delegation of specific review functions to Heritage staff to improve application processing efficiency and customer satisfaction
- Advocating for and responding to changes to provincial heritage legislation
- New Heritage Markham Operational By-law and extensive Terms of Reference approved in 2021

Acknowledging a job well done

Heritage Markham has an astonishing history of accomplishments thanks to both the dedication and commitment of its members, municipal staff and the support of Council. Through legislation, negotiation, persuasion, and on the rare occasion, resignation...Heritage Markham members have fought diligently to protect and preserve their community and its local identity.

These accomplishments were recognized when the community received the first Prince of Wales Prize in 2000 for outstanding stewardship of our built heritage. Heritage Markham was furthered recognized in 2004 by the Ontario Historical Society when it received the Napier Simpson Award as the province's top heritage advisory committee. In 2009 at Queen's Park in Toronto, Markham was presented with the first Lieutenant Governor's Heritage Award for Community Leadership (2008). This award recognizes communities for exemplary leadership and a proven track record in heritage conservation and promotion.

Heritage Markham in 2025

Today, the Heritage Markham Committee is supported by staff from the Heritage Planning section of the Planning and Urban Design Department. Many of the Committee's early review functions and responsibilities are now undertaken by Heritage Staff when the work or proposed change complies with approved policies/guidelines or is non-controversial in nature. However, the Committee continues to provide valuable heritage advice on such matters as restoration approaches and details, financial assistance projects, the design of new infill developments, and the retention of heritage buildings in secondary plans, new plans of subdivision and specific development sites.

Fifty years of commitment

A lot has changed over the last fifty years. The Polaroid camera and slide projector once used by the Committee gave way to a video camera purchased in 1993 to document heritage resources and allow site visits to be brought to Committee meetings. Today, new technology helps the Committee better understand heritage resources and their context, and since 2020, the Committee meets for the most part virtually. However, the commitment of Committee members has remained consistent.

The goal of Heritage Markham has been, and continues to be, to find solutions which allow the significant architectural and historical values of heritage sites and areas to be passed from one generation to the next with a minimum of impact while taking into consideration the needs of present owners, and with the understanding that buildings need to evolve to survive.

Since 1975, countless volunteers from the community have served on Heritage Markham, many of whom served for multiple years. The accomplishments of Heritage Markham in enhancing both resident's and Council's awareness and support for heritage conservation has been substantial. The many heritage resources that have been retained and incorporated into new developments, designated under the Ontario Heritage Act or preserved due to some form of conservation initiative are a testament to Heritage Markham's many years of service and advice to the City of Markham.

R. Hutcheson
Manager, Heritage Planning



