

## City staff directed to create community improvement plan to clear derelict buildings

*The staff report and recommendation to keep the status quo did not go far enough for city council.*

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Sault city council chambers.

City councillors are no longer asking if a possibility exists to establish a community improvement plan that help clear neighbourhoods of derelict homes and buildings.

Now, they're asking staff to create a community improvement plan that can be considered by city council.

Council received a report in connection with a November 2020 resolution asking staff to investigate programs that may incentivize or provide assistance in the demolition of derelict, unsafe or abandoned properties and propose a comprehensive plan to deal with those buildings.

The report to council states that community improvement plans are possible and permitted under the Municipal Act, but in this case, is not recommended by city staff.

"Generally, Community Improvement Plans are intended to provide an incentive to encourage a particular outcome. While there is a short-term cost, there is a long-term financial benefit as a result of increased assessment," states the report penned by planning director Don McConnell.

He recommended that city council keep the status quo and allow last year's amendments to the Property Standards bylaw to proceed and follow due course. Several properties are being monitored and it is anticipated that demolition will occur this year.

The property standards amendments increased enforcement of vacant properties that cause a public safety hazard or a nuisance and allows a bylaw enforcement officer to take immediate action, including demolishing the building and recovering costs through taxes if the property is sold.

McConnell warned that "providing a grant to demolish a building in poor condition is rewarding a property owner that has allowed the building to deteriorate. . . very few dilapidated buildings are not already subject to a work order or are not in arrears on their municipal taxes."

He also reminded council that the cost of demolition often exceeds the value of the vacant property and owners simply abandon the property.

Once a building is demolished the assessed value of the property is also reduced, which results in a loss of tax revenue to the city, the report also points out.

"Providing an incentive to encourage demolition without subsequent development provides no long-term financial benefit to the community," McConnell states.

The City of North Bay has an incentive program that supports demolition of unwanted buildings. Specifically, the plan rebates a portion of the landfill tipping fees but only for the projects which occur within the housing target area, specifically downtown and abutting older residential areas.

The North Bay plan will rebate up to 100 per cent of the landfill tipping fees for sorted material and 50 per cent for unsorted materials.

McConnell notes that only 25 per cent of those fees are paid when the building is demolished. To qualify for the rest of the incentive plan, the building must be replaced within one year's time with a new development.

The report states that North Bay has not received any applications under the program.

The report and recommendation to keep the status quo did not go far enough for city council.

A subsequent motion, penned by Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker and Ward 2 Coun. Luke Dufour, two advocates who have repeatedly said they want derelict buildings cleaned up across the city, specifically directs staff to develop a draft community improvement plan that addresses the issue to either demolish old, unsalvageable buildings or reuse of them.

The resolution states that on a number of occasions council has expressed its view that property standards in areas of the community require improvement and at least two motions have attempted to implement improvement plans.

It directs staff to create and present a draft plan that addresses both the adaptive re-use of existing buildings in the community and the option of demolishing and redeveloping unsalvageable buildings within six months.

The resolution was passed unanimously.

Dufour said council has repeatedly discussed community improvement plans, including during a recent background Official Plan meeting.

Dufour said while most plans may be staff initiated, this one is driven by council.

Shoemaker said the motion repeats what members of council have been requesting in past resolutions.

"They have all come back with reports of this nature," Shoemaker said. "They all say we can do it, but here's why we ought not to do it, but collectively from council, we want to see one of these things advance, so we can try from a holistic perspective to tackle the issue we're trying to get at."

Shoemaker said it's simply "a carrot and stick approach" that has begun through the property standards amendments but should continue with the 'carrot' or community improvement plan approach and the two can work together.

Shoemaker said its time to develop a plan and let council decide whether it wants to approve it or not.

"We want a draft community improvement plan that can address some of the issues we've tried to tackle on a one off basis up to this date, unsuccessfully," he said.

Mayor Christian Provenzano agreed that the issue has been raised and been requested a number of times from city council, indicating a strong desire from city council to implement a plan.