

HERITAGE

Oak Bay examines ways to promote heritage

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. During a time of fast food delivery and rapid urbanization, Oak Bay features tree-lined streets, manhole covers imported (at the turn of the century) from Scotland and England, and mansions from an era of afternoon tea parties. It's not difficult to imagine that this elegant village was home for B.C.'s most famous politicians, artists, architects and law makers: Oak Bay still whispers - very politely if you please, softly - that it has a history worth preserving.

And Mayor Susan Brice wants the whisper to become a voice. Last November, she suggested awarding plaques to people who maintained the heritage character of their homes. This year, newly appointed members of Oak Bay's Heritage Advisory Committee will consider the proposition and recommend candidates for the honor.

"We're trying to put a package together," Brice explains, adding that her idea now includes boulevard markers with information about a location's past. "We'll identify our historically important places - where things happened, certain people lived, or buildings are architecturally significant."

Unlike plaques given by other communities, Oak Bay's plaques won't indicate official heritage designation. Provincial legislation allows municipalities to designate heritage sites but Oak Bay Council has designated only five buildings. One of these, the former John Tod resident at 2564 Heron Street, is believed to be Western Canada's oldest home. It is included in a 1988 catalogue, *Oak Bay's Heritage Buildings: More than just Bricks and Boards*, which details 204 Oak Bay "heritage" buildings.

"Historically, we haven't im-



HERITAGE LOST out in Oak Bay two years ago when this house at 2425 Oak Bay Ave. was moved from its foundation and barged to Yellow Point, as was the house shown on opposite page at 2551 Beach Dr. The building, dating back to 1910, was slated for demolition. Both houses were bought for a dollar by John Mathers.

posed designations. Due to their own interest, residents often do it themselves (consider heritage when restoring or renovating). The owners of Samuel Maclure homes, for example, often go out of their way to preserve the era. They take pride in it," Brice asserts.

Asked whether an end to voluntary efforts would mean imposed designations, she hesitates. There is a pause: she considers a tactful approach for an often controversial issue.

"This seems to be a community where people take an interest in history. When we put out books, people whip them away. Historical data and trivia is gobbled up - Oak Bay people have a good appetite for that sort of thing. Only when a community doesn't preserve its own heritage..." the sentence dangles, unfinished.

If Brice has her way, Oak Bay won't need forced designations. She considers the plaques, a long

term project planned as part of an ongoing heritage awareness campaign, to exemplify something which will teach about local history while also rewarding those who work for heritage preservation.

"It's an alternative way of continuing community interest, of inspiring people to keep the community's unique character," she says.

It is Stuart Stark who explains how imposed designations create problems for municipal councils. Author of *Oak Bay: More than just Bricks and Boards*, a member of the Hallmark Society (a non-profit group which promotes heritage conservation in Greater Victoria), and a heritage consultant who sits on Oak Bay's Heritage Advisory Committee, Stark says the Provincial Heritage Protection Act permits municipal designation but requires compensation for owners of heritage buildings.

"In the last 15 years, nobody has taken the compensation clause to court. The thought of losing terrifies them. And tax dollars are involved so several municipalities, like Oak Bay, shy away from compensation. They aren't eager to designate."

But a government White Paper, recently examined by the heritage committee, may end the problems. A proposed revision of the Heritage Act revokes compensation and allows heritage zoning. As Stark explains it, zoning would turn the heritage characteristics of a building, street, or small neighborhood into an integral aspect of community planning. In the same way as areas zoned for specific purposes (residential, commercial or industrial use, for example) meet certain criteria and undergo established processes before being zoned, heritage zoning would be a consistently applied set of rules and standards.

"It (zoning) would stop the eleventh hour panic that happens when someone has plans for a building and there are protests and everything else which wastes so much time," Stark maintains.

"This will allow a rational approach...everyone can work together to determine what is important in the community, what's worth preserving. That will be beneficial."

The White Paper also permits the protection of interiors, protected in England and some parts of the U.S. but neglected by

current B.C. legislation.

“There’ll be a legal way to preserve a spectacular stair case or entrance hall. Or a church,” says Stark, who won the 1986 Hallmark Society Heritage Award for the restoration of his Oak Bay home, Jolimont. “Sure, people can still renovate, but they’ll keep those unique aspects.”

Oak Bay’s heritage committee studied the revisions, which may become law as early as this spring, with an eye to how - if at all - the municipality will incorporate them into its heritage preservation.

“A lot in this community qualifies, by anybody’s definition, as historically interesting. Sometimes, terms such as heritage designation provide a rigid definition. I don’t think it must be a matter of only structure. There are other aspects and natural amenities to be preserved,” says Brice, perhaps thinking of the heritage magnolia tree (reportedly Vancouver Island’s largest) at 1932 St. Ann Street.

Above all, she stresses that Oak Bay’s history must be a vibrant part of the present-day municipality.

“When new people, who haven’t always had this, arrive, they’re excited because it’s a historically interesting place. We plan to build on that.”

Calling Oak Bay the site of some of B.C.’s earliest and best designed homes, Stark agrees with Brice’s assessment but warns of the threat posed by development pressures.

These pressures are frequently contemplated by people anxious about the town’s stately history. Like Mayor Susan Brice and heritage expert Stuart Stark they hope, and plan, for changing attitudes and laws to keep Oak Bay’s character just as it has always been.

Ironically, their concerns and hopes are from an era of afternoon tea parties. A resident from 1898 until 1929, renowned architect Francis Rattenbury offered himself as Oak Bay’s advisory architect - he hoped to prevent the ruin of Oak Bay’s old world charm.



HERITAGE HOME at 2551 Beach Dr. as viewed from The Esplanade.