

Preserving history: Residents lobbying West Hants council to halt sale, rezoning of property near Fort Edward | SaltWire

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| Posted: Jan. 18, 2022, 1:49 p.m. | Updated:

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Fort Edward National Historic Site, which dates back to the 1700s, is at the centre of attention lately as the municipality is attempting to rezone and sell two vacant lots of nearby land to a developer. Meanwhile, residents and history buffs are lobbying to see something else done with the open space — perhaps the creation of a museum, old-fashioned trading post, or picnic area. Alex Hanes - Contributed

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WINDSOR, N.S. — Once it's gone, it's gone forever.

That's one of the key messages being delivered to West Hants councillors as the municipality looks to sell off property near a national historic site.

Members of the West Hants Historical Society presented to council on Jan. 11, urging it to pause before rezoning the former pool site in Windsor or selling it to a developer looking to build an apartment complex.

Shirley Pineo, the president of the historical society, and vice-president Gary Nelson prepared a report that outlined why the properties, located at 36 and 65 Fort Edward St., should be retained.

“It is historically significant,” Nelson told council.

The land that once housed the former Centennial Swimming Pool, which opened in 1967, dates back hundreds of years.

Fort Edward National Historic Site, located at 67 Fort Edward St., was built in 1750. It served as an important military base (particularly for the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution and the War of 1812, plus troops were trained and deployed from there during the First World War). It also served as a deportation centre and holding facility for Acadian families in 1755.

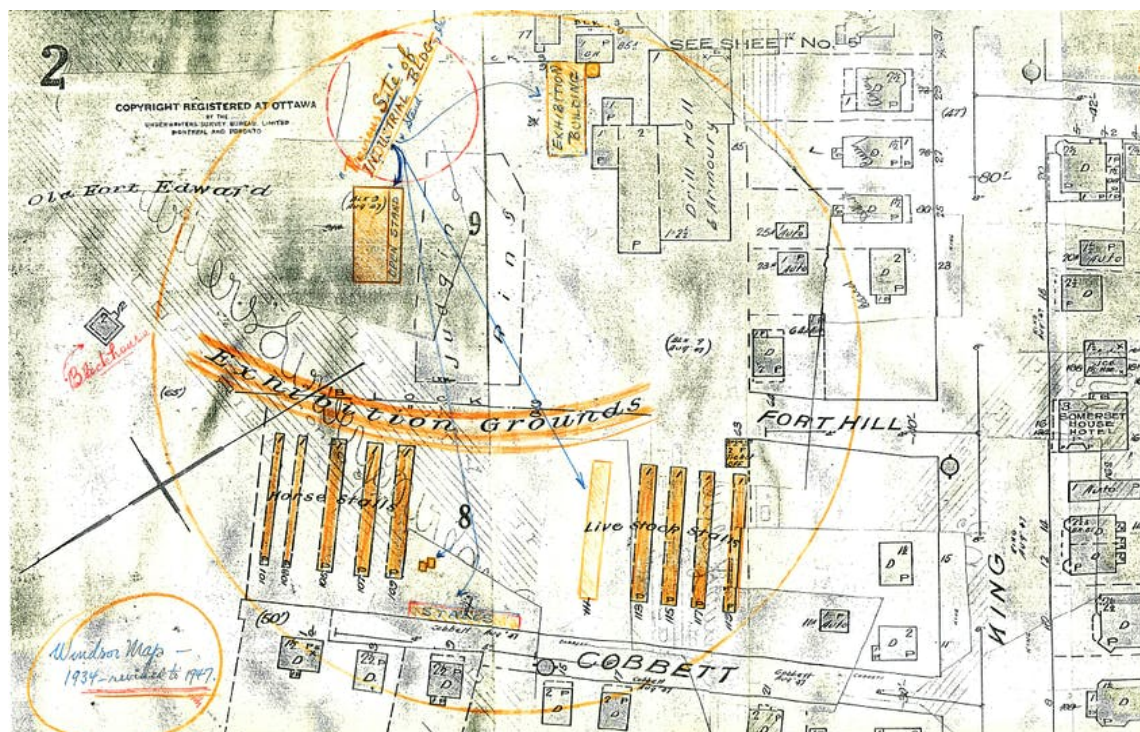
The site currently contains the oldest standing wooden blockhouse in Canada.

“The oldest agricultural fair in North America started on that property in 1765,” Nelson said.

The property where the pool was eventually located housed the horse and livestock stalls.

“We are asking the municipality to give us time to meet with other stakeholders to come up with a plan for action for the future of the land on Fort Edward that is currently for sale,” said Pineo, a former West Hants councillor. “We would like to engage the Mi’kmaq people, the Acadians, the Black community, and any other citizen that is interested in this.”

In the early days, a Mi’kmaq trading post was located at the bottom of the fort.



This map from the 1930s shows the placement of the horse and cattle barns for the agricultural fair. They were located in the same area that the swimming pool and parking lot were placed in the 1960s. - Contributed

Nelson’s presentation highlighted potential legal aspects, land surveys, and what he’s discovered through research.

One of the key findings focused on the right-of-way to the properties in question. He says an easement to the former pool site doesn’t exist — meaning the only access would be from

Cobbett Street.

“Access to the swimming pool lands from Fort Edward Street is questionable,” he said, noting a right-of-way for a public swimming pool or a fair doesn't necessarily extend to access for residential or commercial use.

Nelson told council the cost to upgrade Cobbett Street would likely far exceed the price the county would get if they sold the properties.

Liz Galbraith, a Windsor resident concerned with the future of the former pool site, launched a Facebook page in December 2021 dedicated to raising awareness of the municipality's plans to rezone and sell the site.

She took particular interest in Nelson's findings.

“Those two pieces of property that the municipality is trying to sell off to a developer actually have no street access on Fort Edward Street,” said Galbraith in an interview.

According to maps shown to council, while the road is paved to the Fort Edward National Historic Site parking lot, Fort Edward Street doesn't actually extend that far up.

“They might think that this is a quick and easy sale, but the more we delve into the constraints of that area, notwithstanding the historical value, all of a sudden, it doesn't seem like such a quick and easy or appropriate thing to do,” said Galbraith.

She also questioned who would foot the bill should Cobbett Street be upgraded to accommodate an apartment complex.

“This piece of property needs to support Fort Edward in some way and support the community and not be sold off privately. Once it's gone, it's gone forever,” Galbraith said.

This aerial view, taken by Alex Hanes in December, shows the two lots West Hants is looking to rezone to residential and sell to a developer. Alex Hanes - Contributed

‘All for greed’

Lisa Bland, a citizen member of the Planning and Heritage Advisory Committee, wrote to council as a resident to indicate her dismay after learning that the committee’s request to delay the rezoning process was disregarded. She noted that “many councillors do not seem to heed the concerns of the citizens in regards to selling this lot.”

The municipality has argued that selling the property to a developer would help alleviate some of the housing pressures in the region.

Bland said that’s not the case, noting at least two large developments already slated for the Windsor area.

“Personally, please consider that if we let go of this land we won’t see it again, and all for greed — selling well above what the land was granted to the Windsor Township for,” Bland wrote. “This is personally and historically important to me as my Acadian ancestors were expelled or imprisoned on the site, and we do not have the full story of what occurred there.”



A campaign is underway to prevent the lots, pictured to the bottom left of Fort Edward National Historic Site, from being sold to a developer. The West Hants Historical Society would like to see a museum or something that will help tell the area’s history be constructed there instead. Alex Hanes - Contributed

John D. Wilson, a past-president of the West Hants Historical Society, also wrote a letter to council imploring them to reconsider the fate of the former swimming pool site.

“We are all personally aware that consciously, or unconsciously, it is our past with all its successes and foibles that guides our future. Such is also the case for communities,” wrote Wilson.

“We are blessed in this community with a deep and rich history and heritage upon which, if we are wise, we can anchor our present and future.”

“You don’t see apartment buildings going up on Citadel Hill. So, I don’t think you should really see apartment buildings going up on Fort Edward either.”

- Liz Galbraith

Wilson said council has the opportunity to enhance the area’s reputation and tourism.

“You now have an opportunity to look forward, to be entrepreneurial and creative, as you did with the sports complex, to enhance business opportunities and visitor experience in the community,” he wrote, noting there’s growing community support behind the project.

“This will take work, as do all worthwhile projects, but it will enhance the reputation of this community as the home of citizens who both celebrate our past and incorporate it when planning and building our future.”

Galbraith said Citadel Hill and Fort Edward were both considered equal fortifications in their day to protect the land and the citizenry.

Citadel Hill, located in the heart of Halifax, is a cherished and valued national historic site that serves as a museum and tourist destination.

“You don’t see apartment buildings going up on Citadel Hill. So, I don’t think you should really see apartment buildings going up on Fort Edward either,” said Galbraith.



Six archeologists with Parks Canada spent time in 1986 digging two test pits at Fort Edward, looking for evidence of a palisade. - File Photo

Up for consideration

Coun. Scott McLean initially made a motion for council to suspend the land sale and give more time to the historical society to develop a plan for the property. However, several councillors mentioned they were not prepared to halt anything without more information.

Coun. Jim Ivey said it would be premature for him to shift gears on the subject until more information is provided, saying he would prefer to have “a full picture view.” He wanted to wait until the next council meeting “to debate what may take place, either with proceeding or deferring and the like as it relates to this, and be fully informed on the information legally from both stances on this matter.”



Veterans and members of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Colour Guard, hold flags which were brought into a large tent to kick off the centennial of the Jewish Legion training at Fort Edward in Windsor in 2018. - File

Chief Administrative Officer Mark Phillips said some research is still being conducted, but he's confident in the municipality's legal right to sell the property.

"We have done our due diligence on our side, operationally, essentially around our ability to sell the property. We are comfortable with what our position is on that," Phillips told council.

He said they have frontage on Cobbett Street, so the right-of-way issue presented by Nelson may be a moot point. He also noted the municipality or developer could negotiate with Parks Canada for right-of-way use.

A Phase 1 archeological assessment is also underway.

It's anticipated the topic will return to council Jan. 25.