

Alma College Stripped to its Tower

Alma College

Alma College, the Victorian Gothic Revival school that has stood proudly on a prominent 10-acre site in St. Thomas, Ontario for 130 years, is hanging in by its iconic tower. In January, the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) ruled in favour of demolition after hearing a proposal from the city of St. Thomas and the Zubick family of London—the building's owners—that aimed to keep the college's northwest entranceway intact. The OMB also recommended that any future development include a replication of the school's four-storey façade.



The recommendation isn't enough for councillor Heather Jackson-Chapman, city heritage chair. "It's the end of Alma College. It's another sad day for history in St. Thomas." There are other heritage sites scattered across the city, "just not to the scale that the courthouse and Alma College are," she said.

As for any new uses for the site, she said selection would be limited because it will have to resemble the old Alma College.

The owners were to review the OMB decision with engineers before moving forward with development plans, said Jill Zubick of Alma Heritage Estates. Both the Zubick family and the city of St. Thomas have 60 days to appeal the decision. Ms. Zubick said the family had not picked a timeline for demolition or construction yet.

"We're just working one step at a time," she said, noting steps will be taken to protect the entranceway. As for the tower: "We have to keep part of (it) anyway, but the top part, it starts to get a bit thinner. We really have to see what the engineers will say and what can be done."

If the demolition permit were filed by the Zubicks, city council would have to repeal the 1994 heritage designation bylaw on the site. Mayor Cliff Barwick reported that the city had not decided whether to appeal the OMB ruling.

On the heels of the OMB decision, the Heritage Canada Foundation and the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario urged the Ontario Minister of Culture, Aileen Carroll, to intervene on behalf of Alma College, which was listed on the foundation's 2006 Top Ten Most Endangered Places List.

Under the *Ontario Heritage Act*, the minister could place a stop work order on the property and ensure its ongoing protection through the enactment of a provincial heritage designation.

In the fall of 2006 the city tried to apply a minimum maintenance standard bylaw on the owners, but it was struck down in February of last year in a court appeal. A rewrite of the minimum standards bylaw was then defeated by council in December, arguably paving the way for the demolition of Alma College.

"It's disappointing, but not unexpected," said Andrew Gunn, president of the Alma College Foundation. "We tried very hard to preserve Alma College in at least some measure. But we needed the help of city council to do that. Unfortunately, it became quite obvious that most members of council were more interested in helping the Zubick group than our group."

While the decision isn't ideal, Angus Walton, former chair of the Municipal Heritage Committee, said "It was all we can expect under the circumstances."

Catherine Nasmith writes in *Built Heritage News* that the Alma College Foundation and so many citizens in St. Thomas and across Canada are “outraged at the neglect and government bumbling that has left this landmark in a shameful state. Citizens are making their voices heard all over the province.” Dawn Doty, who lives across the street from the college, is one such voice. She has collected over 3,000 signatures on a petition for MPP Steve Peters to have the province protect this building.

St. Thomas Times Journal, *Ont.*, 01/22, 23 and 24/08; *Heritage Canada press release*, 01/28/08; London Free Press, *Ont.*, 02/23/08; *Built Heritage News*, No. 113, 03/03/08.