

Council hears plea to preserve local archives

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With the fate of the City's Civic Building still up in the air, members of the community remain concerned about the fate of the City's archives.

Members of the Wetaskiwin Branch of the Alberta Genealogical Society were at the regular June 25 city council meeting to ask council to make a commitment to preserve the local historical records.

"When the 'for sale' sign was noticed in front of the old City Hall it caused great consternation in those of us who value archives, who use these archives, and those who have deposited personal, community, church, or other historical documents for safe-keeping and posterity," said Sharon Aney, a past-president of the local Genealogical Society branch.

The Genealogical Society members were supported by a large crowd in the gallery — among them, Rene Georgopolis, the executive

director at the Archives Society of Alberta — and also armed with various letters of support from MLA Bruce Hinkley, the County of Wetaskiwin, the Town of Millet, Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools, the Wetaskiwin and County Sports Hall of Fame, the Millet and District Historical Society, St. John's Lutheran congregation, and the Royal Canadian Legion Branch No. 86.

Though reports in the media stating the archives will not be abandoned, Aney believes it could become a precarious situation with the new ownership of the Civic Building once it is sold. The building was put up for sale after it was deemed as surplus property in a January council meeting.

"If the building is sold again, who protects the archives? Will it be the City or will it be dependant on the good will of the seller or the next purchaser? Or will the community and council be faced again with the same dilemma a few years down



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— *Wetaskiwin Genealogical Society President Alice Hoyle*

the road?" she asked.

Aney urged council to commit to the community it has a plan to maintain or replace an archival safe haven for Wetaskiwin's history, as it has done since the City archives were established in 1978.

"This history is ours," said Aney. "Part of our family, part of our area, part of our province, and country."

"If we do not honour our past, what meaning does our future have?"

The archives is staffed by just one employee, who is helped along by several volunteers to help search and safeguard the many documents housed in the archives,

including photographs, family histories, newspapers, records of organizations and businesses, school attendance registers, early tax ledgers, and more.

A life-long Wetaskiwinite, president of the local Genealogical Society branch Alice Hoyle wants to keep the archives alive to preserve the history not only of the city, but of her family as well.

"Along with so many other settlers in the Wetaskiwin region, their history is recorded in the history books, old issues of the *Wetaskiwin Times*, and church records," she said.

"I'm one of thousands of

people who can say the same thing about their ancestors."

Hoyle said it is "sadly ironic" that 40 years after the archive advisory board was formed by the City, she now has to advocate for the continued existence of the archives.

The cost of digitizing the entire archival collection would be prohibitive and the uniqueness of a municipally-owned archives were other reasons offered by Hoyle to encourage council to maintain the archives.

"The importance of protecting the history of this region should be a given, not something to be debated. Many municipal facilities, by nature are not money makers. Recreation centres, parks, arenas, libraries, and archives are services that are provided to enhance the quality of life for those who live in the area," she said.

"Where is the history of this community kept, if not in the archives?"

The local Genealogical Society branch feels shifting the responsibility of the

archives to the potential new Civic Building owners would not ensure stability and the City should provide a secure standalone facility for the archives.

Aney and Hoyle's presentation was accepted as information, but council could not make a motion to commit to any long-term decisions regarding the archives.

"While I appreciate the passion that the Genealogy Society has for the archives, we don't have the ability to tie future councils' decisions," explained Coun. Patricia MacQuarrie.

"No decision has ever been made by council to close the archives. We have a building that's up for sale and are having discussion around what that's going to look like in the future and we have to keep all those options open. There's been remarkable spreading of rumours in the community about the archives, most of which were non-factual."

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