

Community members supportive of Peace Museum



By Bill Kilpatrick

On March 2 the North Hastings Community Trust held a meeting where they announced that they were gifting their property and building located at 19 Valleyview Drive to the Canadian Peace Museum. The announcement came as a shock to many in the crowd, some were pleased, some were confused, but almost all of them left the meeting with unanswered questions about what the gift meant for the future of the building, and what place, if any, the many former volunteers of the Community Trust, and the Community Trust itself, may have in that future.

On April 3, Chris Houston, president of the Canadian Peace Museum, held a public meeting at St. John's Anglican Church to speak about the future use of the property and address the many concerns and questions that still lingered from the March 2 meeting. Sherwood Hines, the mediator for the event, pointed out that there's been 'so much broken telephone' about the future of the building that he and Houston decided that a meeting needed to be held to ensure that all interested parties were on the same page.

Hines opened the meeting and then asked that the close to 20 people in attendance to introduce themselves and say something about the reasons they were attending the meeting and any concerns that they may have. The people expressed a mix of curiosity, excitement, and a desire to not only learn about Houston's vision for the building and the museum, but also how they could collaborate and help the vision become reality.

Houston spent some time going over his background in humanitarian work for Doctors Without Borders. He described the members

of the Museum's board of directors and how the motivation for a peace museum came from a combined desire of all involved to have an entity that promoted humanitarianism and social justice. Houston also briefly gave a summary of how the building came to be in the possession of the peace museum.

One of the main points that Houston wanted those in attendance to understand was that the peace museum was not just about being anti-war, it was about promoting those issues that allow peace to flourish. Houston pointed out that many people attending the meeting appeared to be concerned about social justice issues such as housing, wealth equity, and people getting enough to eat? adding that these things are not an add-on to the peace museum, it's a core part of promoting peace.

Houston described how when many people think about peace they view it as merely the absence of war and how this view only describes one aspect of peace. Houston elaborated on this point by describing the difference between what he called negative peace and positive peace. He said This is the first thing that's really important to convey is that peace is not just the absence of war. When we talk about peace most people's minds go to war and that's what we call negative peace. The absence of things. The absence of war. The absence of violence. The absence of fear. That is peace and is definitely anti-war. But actually, what makes a peaceful society is everyone having a roof over their head. What makes a peaceful society is an inclusive society. What makes a peaceful society is health-care, protecting the planet, democracy, good relationships between neighbours, and I don't just mean in an abstract sense. How do things get to the violent stage? It's because people have been excluded, or people feel that things are not fair or unequal. So that's positive peace. Positive peace is all these things. that is one of the key things that I wanted to convey to you. As an example, Houston cited programs like WoodShare and Weekend Meals for the Unhoused as fitting the category of positive peace initiatives already working within the community.

Houston empathized with those who had hopes that the Community Trust building was going to be used for things like affordable housing or a warming centre, but pointed out that those things did not happen and were most likely to not happen for multiple reasons that he did not elaborate on. However, he pointed out that the gifting of the building had come with certain conditions. Two of the main conditions were that the community garden would be maintained and that a portion of the main room would be used as a community space for things like meetings for local groups, events, movie screenings, art projects, barbeques, education and training, social enterprises, selling food and/or food distribution, etcetera. Houston added that while no decisions have been made as of yet, he envisioned the space utilizing the aforementioned programs and wants to continue conversations about how that will happen. He pointed out that he received a concerning message from a person on social media who had heard a rumour that he was going to pave over the garden. He promptly thanked the person for reaching out and informed them that the garden would be preserved.

Those in attendance had multiple questions for Houston about the future of the building. One of the attendees asked about how the negotiations were going, if there was a time-line for possession and what was going to happen to the four rooms in the upper part of the building? Houston stated that the negotiations were ongoing and that because there were legal issues regarding possession of the property, he could not give an exact time-line for possession. In terms of the rooms, he said that they would be multipurpose rooms for things like a curator in residence, office and storage of museum artefacts, a working space for community not-for-profits, and a space for promoting peace.

While he could not give an exact timeline for possession he pointed out that the museum was in consultations with a company that designs museums and they have met with a museum planner. Houston also told the group that the museum board has applied for an Ontario Trillium Grant to get an elevator installed in the building.

There were multiple questions from members of the group Weekend Meals for the Unhoused. One member of the group asked if they would still be able to use the building for food storage and Houston responded that they would. Another member inquired about whether or not the museum would be able to assist with the issuance of charitable receipts as the Community Trust did. Houston said that he was willing to do so, since their activities were inline with what the museum was promoting, but he had to check with the Canada Revenue Agency first to ensure it fit their charitable mandate. Houston pointed out that if it did not he would change the mandate to ensure it was inline. Yet another member inquired about using the space as a shelter for the unhoused on weekends when many amenities are closed in Bancroft. Houston said that he was open to the idea as long as it was done safely? and encouraged more dialogue on the subject.

At the end of the meeting Houston summed up the purpose of the meeting stating that when it comes to the future of the Peace Museum 'Everybody's going to have a different vision and I'm just trying to chart a path that works for everybody' adding 'I want people to understand what we're up to? listen to people and do things the right way.' Those in attendance all seemed satisfied and excited with the direction that the Canadian Peace Museum was taking the former Community Trust building. Many participants expressed how they appreciated the open communication and the desire to work together to find common solutions to local problems.

When asked for a comment on the transfer of their building and property, the Community Trust board and leadership collective released a statement that echoed the sentiments felt at the meeting. It stated, 'We are excited to work alongside the Canadian Peace Museum in our shared commitment to education and a deep desire to live in good relationship with the Land and all its inhabitants, including each other, our ancestors, and the original stewards of this land who are the Algonquin people. We will continue to fulfill this dream through compassionate communication training , ceremony, creative expression, growing food together, and nurturing a gift-based economy.'

While he was enthusiastic about taking possession of the building, Houston was not ready to pop the champagne as of yet. He could not overemphasize that he did not want to rush the consultation process as he wants to seek input from the entire community about the future of the Canadian Peace Museum 'I do really want to hear what people think?' he stated.

For more information or to ask questions regarding developments at the Peace Museum visit www.canadianpeacemuseum.ca