

Thorold history packed away

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THOROLD — Treasured pieces of Thorold's rich history are going into cardboard boxes and headed to a basement for storage — for how long, isn't clear just yet.

Inside historic Chestnut Hall, the stone-walled building on Ormond street that serves as the city's museum, Thorold and Beaverdams Historical Society president Randy Barnes and Steve Fulton, chair of the Niagara branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, quietly toiled away last Thursday, packing up artifacts destined to be removed from the museum and stored in the belly of the Thorold Credit Union building.

Barnes said his historical society, which owns the collection at the museum, has no choice but to remove the irreplaceable artifacts because he said the building is no longer safe.

During budget deliberations late last year, city politicians heard that backlogged repairs to the building now have reached at least \$440,000. As part of nearly \$10 million in planned public works projects shelves or cancelled to keep property taxes from soaring, politicians pulled work at the 152-year-old museum building such as replacing the roof, removing a portion of a failing wall, restoring windows, doing structural work and doing an electrical overhaul of the building.

At the time, city chief building official Martin Wild said the condition of the building is "almost to the condemned state."

The historical society, genealogical society and other heritage groups are hoping city politicians agree to let them establish a new, central cultural and heritage centre in the spacious second storey of the new Thorold Seniors Centre — itself recently opened in a historic former schoolhouse on Carleton Street that was the city's previous city hall.

The heritage/cultural centre and the idea of a business incubator for ventures geared toward seniors' wellness and health were the only two pitches submitted when the city issued a call for proposals for that second storey space. The business incubator idea has since appeared to whither.

Earlier this year, city politicians opted to take one more shot at renting out the second storey at market value. If that doesn't happen by about mid-summer, city politicians said they'd work with the historical and genealogical societies to develop a long-term lease agreement to create a new home for the Thorold historical museum.

In the meantime, Barnes said Thorold Credit Union chief executive officer Tim Whalen and credit union board member Fred Neale got approval from the board to store the artifacts in the safety of the credit union basement.

Barnes said removing the artifacts from the city's museum isn't meant to be a pressure tactic.

"We're not trying scare tactics or trying to exaggerate it," he said of the museum's condition. "They (artifacts) just need to be preserved."

The second storey space would be about triple the space inside the existing museum, allowing the various heritage groups a much larger, centralized place, said Barnes. "It would be vastly improved in terms of display potential."

The centralized facility will allow the different groups to consolidate volunteers, resources and scant finances, said Barnes.

"We want to create something organic: a lot of groups and organizations coming together and working together. "All of these groups are doing great work, but we're struggling with financing and we're struggling with volunteers."

Fulton said the new facility will allow the sharing of volunteers, and would be a natural for bringing in students from Thorold Secondary School to help with tours and help teach seniors to use computers.

"Together these groups can come out that much stronger," he said.

Fulton said historical groups in other cities in Ontario are watching the proposed new centralized heritage centre closely, to see if it could be replicated in their cities.



Thorold and Beaverdams Historical Society president Randy Barnes (left) and Steve Fulton, chair of the Niagara branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, are shown at the Thorold museum packing up the original electric alarm that was in the historic former Thorold fire hall, and a wooden board showing the location of fire alarm boxes that used to be spread around the city's downtown.