

# Outrage after two heritage homes razed

**Ontario government says Sandbanks houses posed a health and safety risk**

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*The Ontario government moved ahead with the demolition of two historic homes at Sandbanks Provincial Park on Thursday, despite local efforts to have the buildings saved and repurposed.*

The mayor of Prince Edward County wrote letters. Heritage advocates hired a lawyer. But it wasn't enough to stop the demolition Thursday of two historic homes that have stood abandoned for decades at Sandbanks Provincial Park.

The demolition that took residents by surprise is drawing comparisons to the Ontario government's attempt to demolish the Dominion Foundry buildings in Toronto earlier this year and its plan to expropriate the First Parliament site where Upper Canada's first parliament buildings stood.

Peter Lockyer, part of the Prince Edward County group that tried to persuade Ontario Parks to save and repurpose the houses, rushed out to photograph the destruction when he heard the wrecking crew had moved on the park.

"They started with the MacDonald building, destroying it enough so it is beyond repair. Then they moved onto the Hyatt house and it's now levelled," he wrote in an email to the Star.

The houses that date back to the 1860s and 1870s were originally farm houses the owners turned into hospitality enterprises, pioneering the tourism industry on that part of Lake Ontario about two and a half hours east of Toronto.

"The local people are very attached to these buildings. Some of their first jobs were serving in those restaurants," said Liz Driver, a spokesperson for Save Heritage Sandbanks Homes.

"From the outside they look a little shabby, but they're actually brick buildings on limestone foundations. They are perfectly restorable. We are perplexed the province can't see the potential for adaptive reuse," she said on Wednesday, before learning of the Thursday demolition.

The Ontario government says the homes posed a health and safety risk. They had no significant heritage value with the exception of a hog shed that will be preserved, Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks David Piccini wrote to Prince Edward County Mayor Steve Ferguson.

Piccini's letter says there were only five comments posted to a website the province set up to solicit public input.

"No private entities have stepped forward with funding and a comprehensive plan and/ or business case. Even if private funding was secured for the renovation of both houses, Ontario Parks would still incur annual costs. Given the findings in the studies, it would (be) inappropriate to use taxpayer dollars for this purpose," the minister wrote.

Charts from government consultants, Letourneau Heritage, said that, while the MacDonald farm structures are important in defining the character of the area, "they are not landmarks."

On Thursday, the minister's spokesperson, Andrew Kennedy, said the demolition of both houses was completed as scheduled.

County residents say the government's consultants downplayed the heritage value of the homes and Ontario Parks made no effort to speak directly to them.

"You'd have to be a cyber sleuth to have found their website," said Lockyer.

Toronto heritage architect Philip Evans approached the ministry last year with a proposal to solicit private developers, who would renovate the properties and operate them in the park for a 50-year lease period. He said the site would have worked well as a satellite for Prince Edward County's boutique hotels or offerings in Sandbanks itself much like yurts or other "glamping" experiences. He estimated it would cost about \$400,000 to \$500,000 to renovate each of the houses.

"A 50-year lease gives the investor time to retrieve their investment and make something of the effort. The models are there. We see them every day," said Evans.

He called the Sandbanks properties "a missed opportunity that could have been a win for everyone."

Ferguson said he was disappointed to learn of the demolition. "County council had joined calls encouraging the ministry to seek innovative options for preservation as an alternative to demolition," said the mayor.

The Toronto lawyer representing Save Heritage Sandbanks Homes said the government was aware last Friday that a court application was being filed to stop the demolition.

In a previous court application that was later withdrawn, the government had told an Ontario Divisional Court that no demolition was going to take place until Sept. 15 and yet, on Sept. 9, the demolition occurred, said Eric Gillespie.

But Piccini's spokesperson said the Sept. 15 court hearing date no longer applied because the initial court application was withdrawn.

"Once that case was withdrawn, the date was vacated by the courts and does not have any bearing on today's demolition date," said Kennedy.

Gillespie said it's not yet clear what the residents' next steps will be. Whatever happens, he said, "There still appears to be a real need to address the underlying problem, which is the government's failure to follow their own legislation, not only in Prince Edward County, but elsewhere.

"They were taken to task about the Foundry buildings here in Toronto. That was also an example of the government not following their own rules around these type of situations," he said.

"What the legislation says is we don't pick and choose once a property has heritage value, we try to preserve it. Once a property is a heritage property it inherently has great value and the government recognized that many years ago by saying demolition is the very last resort for any heritage property," said Gillespie.