

Talbot leads heritage charge in Unionville

Fighting for heritage

By **Steffania Rizzi**
Staff Writer

It was perhaps eight years ago that Richard Talbot became a household name for heritage activists in Unionville.

When the town of Markham proposed to build what became the Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery at the corner of Main Street and Carlton Road, many residents opposed the proposal, fearing the building would not fit with the area's historic character.

"We hated the design," said Mr. Talbot, referring to the group he helped establish 18 months ago, the Unionville Villagers Association. "So did Heritage Markham and the Unionville Ratepayers Association.

"(According to the blueprints) it looked like a brick box. It looked like a warehouse," explained Mr. Talbot.

"A small gallery won't generate the kind of traffic Main St. required. We needed a one-of-a-kind retailer at the end of the street to attract shoppers."

The council of the day proceeded despite residents' disapproval. But Mr. Talbot said the community nonetheless sent a strong message to politicians.

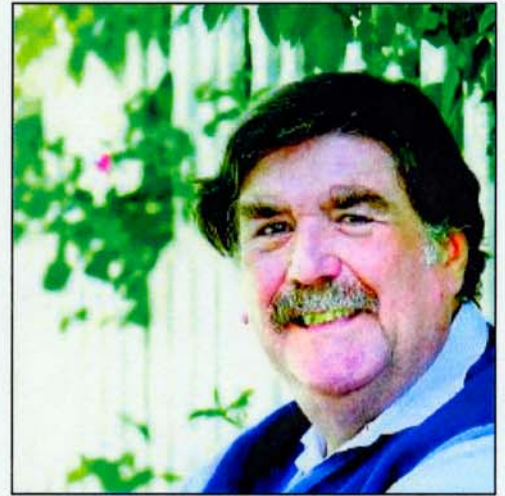
"Although we lost that particular battle, we made council sit up and realize there is a groundswell of opposition to having it mess around with architectural history," he said.

"The art gallery produced the catalyst to bring together people who didn't even know each other, but wanted to preserve Main Street's heritage."

Mr. Talbot, president and managing director of Talbot Consultants International, established the Unionville Villagers Association to represent the interests of commercial and property owners within the Unionville Heritage Conservation District.

"We're kind of regarded (by council members) as a dangerous revolutionary group. They think they're going to have a Les Miz on Main St., with barricades and flags," he chuckled.

Prior to forming the association, Mr. Talbot revived and is past-president of the Unionville Historical Society. He is also a past member of Markham's LACAC (Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee).



Photo/Sjoerd Witteveen
Richard Talbot
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His involvement in local and municipal affairs takes up so much time, Mr. Talbot said it almost seems as if he has a second job.

Despite the lengthy hours and numerous council meetings he routinely attends, Mr. Talbot said he and others are fighting for a worthy cause.

"In the past, people gave up because they thought they couldn't fight city hall," he said.

"If you really believe in it, you have to keep faith and keep fighting for it.

"We moved here because of the architecture," continued Mr. Talbot, who arrived in Unionville with his family 12 years ago. "We believe we have to fight to preserve it."

Mr. Talbot's interest in heritage preservation began long before he moved to York Region.

When he lived in Victoria, B.C. and established his marketing and consulting business in the early 1970s, one of Mr. Talbot's first projects was to revitalize and help preserve a section of endangered heritage buildings in Victoria's downtown core.

Mr. Talbot's business savvy has led him to complete studies and projects in many countries and continents, from the United States and Bermuda to Taiwan and the Czech Republic.

Mr. Talbot is well-regarded among his business peers, so much so that he was one of a handful of speakers selected to speak at the Heritage Canada Foundation's annual convention last year.

Because Unionville is one of the few remaining York Region communities rich in architectural heritage, Mr. Talbot said he and other residents remain committed to preserving its past, no matter what the obstacle.

"It's become very personal," he said. "This area means something to us and we want it to mean something to the rest of the community, too."