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Heritage officials to discuss historic house with council

By DERWIN GOWAN

MIRAMICHI - Staff from the provincial Heritage Branch will meet with Neguac Village Council next week.

Village Council invited the branch, part of the Department of Economic Development, Tourism, and Culture to discuss the restoration project at the historic Maison Otho Robichaud.

La societe historique de Neguac, which owns the old house, is carrying out the restoration.

However, the province declared it a protected heritage site in 1994, meaning that the society cannot legally do anything to the house without approval from the Heritage Branch.

La societe historique sharply disputes the era which the Heritage Branch believes the house was built. This, in turns, affects what the restoration should include.

To put it in simple terms, la societe historique believes that pioneer settler Otho Robichaud built the bouse around 1790 and that the restored fireplace should include a bread oven.

The Heritage Branch believes that Otho Robichaud's son Louis buüt the house at a later date and that it should not include a bread oven.

Historian Jean Daigle of Moncton submitted a report to the Heritage Branch on Jan. 4 supporting the later date - even though architect Regina Kaniak of Fredericton says cuts in the sill of the old house could indicate that the house had a bread oven.

Louise Gillis, assistant deputy minister for culture, said on Monday that the date of the house and which Robichaud built it does not detract from its value as a heritage property.

"No matter what opinion you take . . . this is still a significant heritage house," she said. "We're not going to walk into there and rip the plaque off the bouse and leave. "

(The plaque, unveiled in 1994, declares it "Maison Otho Robichaud.")

Ms. Gillis considers the bread oven which la societe historique plans to build as "not authentic," but she said historians can change their opinions, too.

"People have taken sides; they think if somebody has won, they have lost," she said.

Bill Hicks, manager of commemoration and planning at the Heritage Branch, also, hopes the two sides can come together to support the project.

"It's a great bouse, it's an important little house, and we still feel it's worthy of its designation, " he said. "It's a community initiative, so the community will decide."

He said the controversy over who built the house, and when, is part of the story.

"We are all part of the story of this house now, the story continues," he said.

Despite their disagreements, Mr. Hicks said the Heritage Branch is still dealing with correspondence with la societe historique, and the process for approvals for work this year continues.