This page was exported from - The Auroran
Export date: Thu Mar 28 14:09:06 2024 / +0000 GMT

Church redevelopment clears Public Planning hurdle



By Brock Weir

Plans for the redevelopment of Aurora United Church and adjacent retirement centre cleared another hurdle last week, receiving unanimous consent from Council members at Wednesday night's Public Planning meeting.

With this tentative approval, developers and concerned neighbours will likely have until July 4 to continue working together to hammer out remaining differences.

Following last week's Public Planning meeting, the redevelopment of the site, which includes a now-seven storey retirement complex, will next come before elected officials at a General Committee meeting, followed by a Council meeting to ratify that decision.

Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, told lawmakers and residents alike that his final report could come before Council by the end of June but would most likely take until the July 4 cycle to be complete.

In the meantime, Councillors told a packed house they hoped the intervening weeks will allow the two disputing parties to address remaining differences ? particularly building height, tiering and massing from Tyler and Temperance Streets ? before the next meeting.

?All of us on Council are hopeful that we can move forward with this application in a way that satisfies the congregation of the United Church and local residents and we can move forward,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?Aurora is a town of good neighbours and I think we would all like to continue forward.?

Added Councillor Paul Pirri: ?Collaboration isn't always a quick, tidy, easy thing to do. Sometimes it takes work and sometimes there are concessions made on all sides. Keep moving forward and keep working together and I am sure by the end of it we will have something there we are all proud of. The second you stop thinking about our neighbours as neighbours is when we get into trouble.?

At the start of last week's meeting it became clear the proposal now before Council was a markedly different one.

Speaking on behalf of the proponents, planner Sarah Millar said a ?substantial? amount of work had been done to modify the plan since March. Height, she conceded, was an issue with many community members, as were massing and setbacks from the side streets. Nevertheless, Amica was able to rework their retirement home plans to come down two storeys and reconfigure the space to accommodate 152 units rather than the initially proposed 159 units.

Parking issues brought up from residents had been largely resolved, as had redesigning the back end of the building to be more in keeping with the adjacent residential neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, Council members said they understood many of the residents' remaining concerns but said they had a fine line to walk.

?I will always support any application if the concerns of the residents are met,? said Councillor John Abel. ?That is what tears it with me. The developers know how to talk to staff and we make decisions, but we have to make decisions based on what the residents are telling us. It is loud and clear the residents on Tyler and Temperance and surrounding areas have an issue with the massing, specifically on the back part. I hear that loud and clear.

?It was a tremendous loss but often out of the ashes there is an opportunity and now we can rebuild and put a sustainable entity and the outreach they provide can continue and it will be a model that sustains for many, many years. This is a great model moving forward. It is a responsible model.?

In any redevelopment, he said, there has to be a benefit to the wider community and providing these residential units for seniors is a benefit.

Councillor Tom Mrakas was another Council member who said the potential benefits from the development needed to be weighted in the process.

?We are elected to represent all of the residents of this Town and the Town as a whole,? he said. ?When we look at planning and applications, we look at it from a high level view of what is good for the Town as a whole. This vision has been going on since 2010 when the Aurora Promenade Plan was developed and it was to intensify the Yonge Street Corridor. That is what we are doing. It is also helping with the growing population of our seniors [and] we're desperately going to need extra housing and that is what helps out with this.

?I have always stated that if there is not a benefit to the community as a whole then we don't move forward with an amendment. As we look forward I see many benefits in this application. I see that the proponent has listened to the concerns, have made substantial changes, they have dropped two floors, have done some extra tiering. I would like to see a little bit more tiering but I think when we get to that general committee meeting we can still work on a few things. We're very close but I think we need to keep moving forward and we have an obligation to make a decision tonight. While it is not a final decision we need to make a decision moving forward.?

Councillor Jeff Thom had a similar perspective, outlining the benefits to the community and also the hope that there is a way to move forward this summer ?in a way that satisfies the congregation of the United Church and local residents.? Aurora, he said, is a ?town of good neighbours? and that should be the order of the day.

Listening to the comments of her peers, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was ?proud? to be part of a Council that articulates the values of residents, but said, from her perspective of the longest-serving incumbent Council member, that this planning application was one of the most ?difficult? she has seen yet.

?Usually we have residents on one side and a developer on the other. In this case, we have residents in the neighbourhood and we have residents who also are part of the developer's plan because they are part of the church community,? she said, joking that, as a Libran, she wanted to please everybody. ?I am going to look at it from a planning perspective. We have an OP (Official Plan) and part of that OP is our Promaenade plan and that is a vision for Yonge Street. In this case, it is the historic part of Yonge Street. Then we have the respect in our official plan for Stable Neighbourhoods and for transition so that stable neighbourhoods are protected. For both of these, the height and the massing and the setbacks are not what is required.

?I know that everybody has worked very hard to come up with a plan that is so much better and so many of us have said so much closer and thank you and thank you to the residents who have worked so hard as well. Hopefully when we come back to our general committee meeting there will have been a little bit more progress made so I can say we have been able to support the needs of our residents and a wonderful and contributing church community.?