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United Church, retirement home approved

By Brock Weir

Aurora United Church's march towards a new permanent home is set to take a significant step forward this week as Council prepares the official plan amendments to make it a reality.

For many local lawmakers, the fact that developers have brought the height of the church's associated Amica retirement residence down to six storeys from the originally proposed nine was a good compromise in addressing the concerns of residents who were alarmed over the tall building looming over the Temperance Street neighbourhood.

Others, however, were less convinced, questioning the benefits such a development will bring to the downtown core.

?In my opinion, it is a good plan and a high quality design,? said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, turning his focus to the Yonge streetscape. ?It meets the intent of the Official Plan and their vision for the Promenade. It will go a long way to revitalizing our downtown, introducing a place of worship back onto the site, as well as providing for the retirement home and housing for the aged, as well as independent memory care. It will be a good addition to our downtown core.?

This was a view shared by some members of Council, including Councillor John Abel who said there were economic benefits to the development --- but when it comes to commercial revitalization, it could miss the mark. He questioned what benefits there would be to the overall community and, once that benefit is identified, give the public a chance to realise that benefit and collaborate.

Indeed, collaboration was the sticking point for a number of Council members who remain in opposition to the redevelopment plan.

?This is such a complicated issue because everyone wants the church to be able to rebuild after such a tragedy and be viable,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, underscoring the loss of the church following a devastating April 2014 fire. ?What I was looking for was something that would be a little better for the adjoining neighbourhood and I was also looking for something that would be more respectful for the heritage area.?

Among the items still on her wish list, she said, was a further decrease in height and massing, a vision originally outlined in plans for the area.

?What the church wants really, really doesn't fit in with the vision of this area and that vision has been protected for at least 30 years in official plans,? she contended, noting that very little has changed in the plan since area residents spoke out against the plan at the most recent public meeting. ?We don't have a revised plan, we don't have any improvements in the plan from the plan that was presented at the Public Planning Meeting [so] how can we go forward and approve this if we almost all felt there was room for improvement and it hasn't been presented? I am very uncomfortable with that and I think we have to do what we say.?

For others, however, enough modifications have been made since the original nine storey concept was presented to Council that, despite their earlier opposition, they are comfortable enough to vote moving forward.

?At the last Public Planning meeting, I agree we all said we would like to see a few changes,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas. ?I believe I used the word ?tinkering.' We were very close and we wanted to see some continuation between the work of the applicant and the residents within the area. I do share some of those sentiments that I am concerned [the meetings between proponents and residents] never materialized but, in my opinion, I do see some benefit to the community with this application.

?My major concern was the height and I think it has dome down to that six storeys [on Yonge Street frontage, seven on Temperance]. We could sit here and have an argument on whether it is six storeys or seven, but the way I look at it is that on Yonge Street it is six. I am comfortable moving forward with that. It is within our Downtown Core and we are looking to revitalize our Downtown Core. We are going to have more residents [in the area and] I think rightfully we are going to have the Aurora United Church rebuild where it belongs.?

By the end of last week's talks some Councillors remained more lukewarm towards the proposal and while they were comfortable with the amendments being approved this week took comfort in the fact that talks can still continue before it reaches a final hurdle this fall at the site plan approval stage.

?This is obviously a big issue for the Town,? said Councillor Jeff Thom. ?The last public meeting we had was packed, and tonight, and we were looking forward to the proponent meeting with the ratepayers again to mitigate some of their concerns. I know there were some minor mitigation steps that were taken, although they did not meet with the ratepayers again after that at the last meeting. Having said that, I think based on the minor changes that were made at the last meeting and the fact Mr. Ramunno has just indicated we will be looking at bonusing provisions?I will be in favour of moving this forward tonight.

?They have come a long way from their original application and even though it is not ideal, I believe that if we can have some further negotiation as we come up to site plan? I am happy to support the United Church application in front of us this evening.?