

Yonge and Wellington apartment plan clears Council amid downtown parking concerns



By Brock Weir

A proposed new apartment building on Yonge Street just south of Wellington Street took one step closer to becoming a reality last week.

Council approved a site plan for a five storey, 12 unit rental apartment building for the vacant lot between the old Aurora Post Office/Clock Tower building and Old Town Hall, amid concerns over parking.

With parking in Aurora's Downtown Core continuing to be a concern amongst residents, business owners, and some Aurora lawmakers, worries were raised that approving the plan with just 12 parking spaces would only exacerbate a problem.

According to Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, there is a need to reduce required parking for the building, which will be going to Aurora's Committee of Adjustment for approval. Ordinarily, this building would require 26 parking spaces, but under the Town's approved Aurora Promenade plan, this requirement has been reduced to 14.

"I am in favour of intensification in the Downtown Core and I have said that many times," said Councillor Chris Ballard. "At the same time, I have spoken in the past in this particular area because it has been, from the day I set foot in Town, an issue with disputes about who owns what parking, who has the right of way to access parking.

"It has been quite a mess and I fear that putting this building in, reducing the amount of parking, removing parking spaces is just going to further make that whole parking area a complete mess."

Similar views were expressed by Councillor Michael Thompson who reiterated his view from earlier this month that he did not want to solve one problem, such as revitalization in Aurora's downtown core, by creating another with parking. More assurances were needed, he said, that the new development would not put any further strain on the area. A strategy was needed, he added, to come up with a solution to the parking problem that would satisfy all stakeholders.

"I had a few calls this week about parking around the Library," said Councillor Thompson. "It is an issue and I don't want to compound it with this development. There is a parking problem today and if this proposal goes forward, it is not going to change. We're still going to have a parking problem and it is incumbent upon all of us to work together with downtown merchants to help develop that overall parking strategy and bring forward some ways to alleviate that pressure and bring about that change so it helps resolve the issue. Perhaps it is Library Square."

Although solving the parking problem was an issue for some, others approached it as striking the right balance amongst the need to revitalise and intensify in this area, while ensuring the rights of business owners and homeowners.

It is a struggle; we're already recognizing the extreme benefit of having this development on Yonge Street and the challenge of parking, with or without this building there, said Councillor Sandra Humfries. I am not sure that 12 units is going to make a huge impact in addition to what is already a bad, bad situation. Hopefully we'll get a good opportunity to provide some initiatives to get some additional relief for the downtown core overall and not just for this additional building.

It is perfect for what we want to do with downtown Aurora. It is extremely beneficial to our community and our businesses downtown.

For Councillor Paul Pirri, although the discussion revolved around parking, at the end of the day it was the rights of the property owner that were at issue.

I am grateful we have had these parking spots that have been used by individuals within the community, but ultimately we have to remember that this property belongs to an individual and this individual has rights, he said. I find it hard to believe that in this situation where somebody owns the property, we're essentially giving more rights to people who are trespassing on that property to park than we are to the actual owner of the property. This is a great proposal, but I am having a hard time understanding why there is such a concern about who is using the parking on the proponent's property.

Existing parking spots on the lot are currently rented out.

Relief and clarity on the downtown parking situation could be coming in small measures in the future, however.

According to Town Solicitor Warren Mar, negotiations are ongoing to clarify the ownership of parking lots along Temperance Street, just west of Yonge. Several snags, however, have come up at the Ontario Land Registry Office on just who owns the properties in question.

The ownership there goes back to the 1840s, so they are very old documents and it is a mishmash of property ownership. We have a parking lot that we maintain and we continue to allow the public to use that which is straddling property lines of both public and private property. On the east side of Yonge Street, where this property is located, the situation is somewhat similar.

Should the parking variance be approved at a future meeting of Aurora's Committee of Adjustment, Mr. Ramunno proposes the developer pay cash in lieu of parking which, he said, go towards looking at parking alternatives elsewhere in Aurora.