

Aurora United Church should be a good neighbour in rebuild, say ratepayers

By Brock Weir

A church is intended to serve the community, but Aurora Village Ratepayers say Aurora United Church's rebuild plan is falling short of serving the needs of the community as a whole.

Earlier this spring, Aurora United Church (AUC) announced plans for its ambitious rebuild on the corner of Yonge and Tyler Street, which will include not only a new church space following the disastrous fire of April 2014, but also a nine-storey retirement complex built by Amica on a 99 year land lease with the church.

While the ratepayers, which includes residents from Tyler and Temperance Streets, as well as surrounding areas, insist that they welcome a church being rebuilt on the site, and respect AUC's right to rebuild in conjunction with a retirement home developer, nine storeys is simply too much and area consultation has been too little.

"We are their direct neighbours and they never came to us in the whole process," says David Cabianca. "We have an expedited process to go through and we're all struggling to get things. We have 150 who have signed our petition [calling for the height of the nine-storey complex to be reduced in height], but we have 85 per cent of the houses within a one block radius."

Mr. Cabianca's spouse, Troy Hourie, adds "we have enough to make a congregation ourselves," and the group of ratepayers nod in agreement when he adds their voices should be just as important as the church's.

Many of the ratepayers live in century homes and have put their time and money into making sure these homes stand the test of time. They were held to higher standards than they proposed development, they say, and this should be considered before Council gives the final approval to the AUC proposal.

"Our question is, why can't they be in keeping with the Aurora Promenade vision, which is five storeys?" asks Angela Daust. "If we allow this, why aren't they allowing 12 storeys or 20 storeys? Then what is the vision for Downtown Aurora? were all held to a certain standard that we had to follow. We could have easily torn [down our home] and rebuilt it for much less than what we spent renovating. Why is it that we have to be held to that standard and we don't?"

Consultants retained by AUC and their build partners to steer the project told Council members at March's Public Planning meeting that a nine-storey retirement home is the only way to make the church rebuild viable.

The Ratepayers dispute this claim, citing AUC newsletters from 2016 through early 2017 indicating a number of changes have taken place with the plan.

In a 2016 bulletin, the Church Council said they had received \$8 million of capital from insurance proceeds and expected a \$3 million upfront fee to be received once they received a building permit. The upfront fee, they said, would be use towards the construction of a new church on the land.

The 2016 outlines a preliminary design featuring six to seven storeys and between 120 and 140 rental units for seniors, plus amenities.

"It needs to be big enough to make it worthwhile for the retirement residence," said the church. "Whereas a condo would have been nine storeys, this brought it down to seven storeys."

A further bulletin from earlier this year said that, after the fire, AUC had two alternatives "rebuild the church exactly what we had or pause and revision our purpose for a longer term and build a new structure to meet those needs."

"If we had chosen the first alternative then our building would likely be complete by now," the reported. "Our reality though appears to be a five year journey from fire to a new building. As a result, the fire has caused real operational financial hurdle to overcome up to and including 2019."