

Back to the drawing board? Don't blow it? Rebuild plan gets mixed public reviews



By Brock Weir

Will a nine-storey retirement home, coupled with a rebuilt Aurora United Church, set a negative precedent for the Town, or might it be a blown opportunity the community could live to regret? These were the questions Council was left to ponder after a packed house weighed in on the local church's plans to rebuild.

Attracting a mix of parishioners young and old, local business advocates, and residents of adjacent heritage homes, proponents of the plan were left with no shortage of feedback.

"I was in business on the same block for 40 years," said Mike Evans, who owned True Value Hardware at Yonge and Wellington until he retired in 2014, speaking on behalf of himself and several landowners on Yonge and Wellington Street West. "Council should consider increasing the height to nine storeys in the Downtown Core. This will help fill up the vacant lots. Some of these have been vacant for over 50 years. With this development, Council has an opportunity to start downtown revitalization. Don't blow this opportunity."

Another community member in the pro-camp was Dave Hanna, who said senior living options will present a pressing need in the not-so-distant future, a need that can be addressed in the rebuild plan. "Strikingly different," was one comment he saw online relating to the plan and this, he contended, should be considered a plus.

"When we moved here 35 years ago, Aurora was 17,000 people," he said, noting future projections are on target for 70,000. "This is reality. Let's be realistic. We have a population of 70,000, they are going to be heavily oriented towards seniors. We very much need a seniors' facility. We need community hubs. We don't need empty spaces. We need a beautiful building there and I think what we achieved through the last 34 months of development and planning is a strong architectural presence. It is not the 140 year old church. I know people living in 115 year old houses would like to see that 140 year old church back, but it's not there, so let's be realistic. A contemporary home needs contemporary facilities."

This was a view shared by neighbour Brigitta Gamm, who said "change is coming."

"I have seen nothing more certain in Aurora than change, it happens all the time," echoed parishioner Steve Falk. "Yes, it is change. There is nothing but change in a Town like Aurora, but the likelihood of high density high rises, places for people to grow and live, seniors living close to transit and other things that are going to be happening on our main street, that is the kind of change I think is good change. [Aurora United Church] has been working on this for the better part of three years trying to make it fiscally responsible and responsible for the kinds of needs at the centre of Town, and I would like to say I support it. There is incredible work being done there, a lot of thought going into it, and they are the centrepiece of the community."

Those in the opposing camp, however, said they were largely pleased with the plans to rebuild the church, but the retirement home was another story altogether.

"Like many residents in Aurora, I moved here to get away from the traffic congestion, noise pollution, crime, crowding, and lack of community I found while living in Toronto," said Tyler Street resident Angela Doust. "I didn't want to raise my family there. I

wanted to raise my family in a safe, friendly, small community with lots of green space in an old house with a front porch so I could sit out in the evening and wave hello to my neighbours as they passed by. A small town feeling within commuting distance to Toronto where I work. I found this combination 21 years in Aurora.

?Since then, it has been a constant battle to try and keep my neighbourhood like this.?

That neighbourhood is one with history, environmentally sensitive areas, and wildlife, all of which would be adversely affected by the rebuilding plan and the ensuing traffic on Tyler Street, she argued.

?Every time an old structure is torn down, developers seem to want to shoehorn into the lot the largest possible building or structures without considering the surrounding area and its inherent nature to the point where they have to apply for many exceptions and amendments to the planning bylaw to squeeze even more units onto the lot. This demonstrates nothing more than greed by trying to maximize their profits. It shouldn't be this hard to live in peace in a residential neighbourhood. Traditionally, churches were supposed to be the centre of the community. They were supposed to improve the lives of the residents around them. This development will not only cause a negative impact on the surrounding residents for the enjoyment of their properties but the retirement structure will now be the centre of the community and not the church.?

These concerns were raised by a several other speakers at Wednesday's meeting, including Tanya Pietrangelo, who said she too moved to Aurora from Toronto, falling in love with the charm of the heritage community.

?[This plan] would drastically alter the charm of the Aurora Village and not for the better,? she said, outlining three concerns ? height of the proposed retirement building, the modern style not fitting into the established community, large-scale crosses on the steeples ?not conveying the message of inclusion in multicultural Aurora, and worries over parking.?

Adults were not shy in speaking out either for or against the plan, but when it comes to the two youth who came forward to the podium, they said they were in favour of moving forward.

?For my entire life I have been going to Aurora United Church,? said 16-year-old Emma Kerswell. ?It has always been a staple in the community and it doesn't matter what it looks like. From my perspective, everyone is going to know it is a church. It is still going to be that beautiful, historic site and still on the same location it was built on, it is just changing. Change is a beautiful thing and it has been happening for a very long time here in Aurora and I think it needs to continue to happen.

?I am part of the next future of Aurora, I am part of the next generation and I think this new design is absolutely gorgeous. Is it taller than the rest of the surrounding areas? Yes, but I think we need to realise we need adequate housing for seniors. If we can do it in a beautiful way that is connected to a gorgeous church, then why not go for it? If Aurora is changing, why not make it more modern and more beautiful to keep with the times??