

Magna land development raises residents' concerns

For nearly two decades, the east and west corners of Wellington Street East and Mavrinac Boulevard were part of a broader vision for Magna's global headquarters across the street.

Now, plans to transform these two nearly-vacant lots into a development of more than 250 homes and an apartment building for seniors has raised concerns from nearby residents.

Council considered the application at last week's Public Planning meeting.

If borne to fruition, the development will consist of a six-storey seniors' apartment building, 40 single detached dwellings, and 209 townhouse units in a variety of configurations, including back-to-back units.

39 of the 40 proposed detached homes would back onto the existing streets of Westlock Crescent, Halldorson Avenue and Kane Crescent, and the remaining unit will front onto a private road that is part of the larger condominium development.

Westlock resident Catherine Billet made her concerns known at last Tuesday's meeting via a Zoom delegation to Council.

"Five years ago, I tried to sell my house and was unable to because the question always remained: what is going to happen with the land?" she said. "With that unknown, buyers didn't want to invest their money so, at that time, it became very [clear] to myself and my husband that we needed development there of some kind. We have been waiting patiently and seeing what is going to happen.

"When we bought the house, Magna told us they were going to build buildings there and they had restrictions on what that would look like and that's what our neighbours thought.

"I welcome residential there. I would much rather look at homes than warehouses or anything else they might put there."

While she said she was happy the developers have taken some of their concerns into the plan and compromises had been reached in many areas, the sheer density of the proposed development was still a concern.

"We were all a bit shocked by the density of the building with the condominiums and the townhomes," she said. "That is a lot of traffic and a lot of people in a small amount of land, however I do understand the reasons for it."

The area in question is a key area for intensification, as mandated by the Province, due to its proximity to transit and other amenities. That, she said, is understood by the residents, but building larger homes on wider lots could help address the visual density of what is proposed.

"It is more about the visual aspect," she concluded. "We want them to look like they visually belong there." Kane Crescent resident Jonathan Garcia also had concerns over the density, particularly its impact on traffic. The development, once completed, will impact everyone who lives on his street.

"We are all concerned about our street being used as a shortcut for people who want to go on to Bayview where a lot of the grocery stores and amenities will be accessed," he said.

Others were concerned about the change of land use.

These Magna lands were originally designated for use as a business park. For some residents, this was something they said they banked on when they purchased their property.

‘There must be a good reason for such a designation [of a business park] so my question is why don't those reasons make sense today?’ asked Conover Avenue resident Dennis Qiao. ‘This Council should honour the contract.’

Added area resident Elias Paisley: ‘As a taxpaying resident, I believe somebody wants to make opportunities in business, they can do so where they see fit, but when we moved here and bought this property and we were looking at the lands that were adjacent to where we lived, we were of the impression that these lands [would] be developed as were originally laid out at least in terms of the business park and potentially other opportunities.’

Council ultimately gave the green light to moving the proposal for further consideration at a future General Committee meeting.

‘This is quite a diversion from what we had in mind and what residents had in mind,’ said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who was the only Council member to vote against moving it forward. ‘I do understand the business park wouldn't fly because it just wasn't an ideal area, so we have gone to residential. I think we need to plan this new residential [development] in context with the existing neighbourhood.’

Councillor Michael Thompson agreed that he was supportive of seeing these lands developed for residential use rather than a business park as it is more in keeping with the neighbourhood, but he was interested in ‘suitable development.’

‘I am not entirely comfortable with a six-storey seniors' building,’ he said. ‘I recognize the fact it is great to have them, we definitely need them, but I think I would have preferred to see it stay at four storeys, which is what is allowed under the bylaws and the Official Plan because there is some concern it will stick out a little bit.’

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter