

New condos put Yonge and Wellington traffic into the spotlight

By Brock Weir

Two new apartment and condo projects will significantly change the landscape of the heart of Downtown Aurora, but while Councillors are hailing the new redevelopment projects, some are concerned on how it will impact already contentious parking issues.

At the centre of the impact zone is Centre Street.

Councillors are set to approve a 24 unit residential complex built around a heritage home just east of the old Canada Post building on Wellington Street, backing on to Centre Street.

When this new residential building is complete, it will join the Centro condominium development on the opposite side of Centre, a 95 unit condo building with retail space on the ground floor.

Centro was originally planned as a 74 unit building but, following Council's approval this summer, the building was reconfigured to accommodate additional individual units and underground parking after builders encountered soil challenges.

But, despite giving their approval for the Wellington Street project at the committee level, Councillors expressed some worry about how the significantly increased number of residents clustered so close to Yonge and Wellington would impact traffic on the widely derided intersection.

"I think it is a terrific proposal," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner of the plan to incorporate the heritage building into the design of the new complex. "Incorporating it so beautifully into the design is so special" but it does represent a very large change of use."

While Councillor Gaertner also addressed concerns over screening to protect existing Centre Street neighbours from light pollution from traffic and other matters, traffic dominated much of last Tuesday's discussion.

"We have 120 new residents that are essentially going to be impacting Centre Street and the area around it," said Councillor Michael Thompson of the combined impact of the two housing developments. "It's fine if you're going north on Yonge Street. It's easy enough to make the right turn on Centre and up you go. For those looking to go south, you can't do that on most times of the day or east towards the 404."

Noting he sees the traffic most impacting Centre and Spruce Streets, he asked for assurances that traffic flow is given equal weight to traffic impact in approving the plans.

"It's a valid point and we're [ensuring] the required traffic studies take a focused look [not just] on the immediate area, but the surrounding road network and what impacts development would have on the surrounding networks so traffic can move freely in that intersection," said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, on new developments in the Aurora Promenade having an impact on Yonge and Wellington.

Traffic specifically on Yonge and Wellington, as well as the Centre and Spruce side streets were not the only causes for concern. As the proposed building fronts onto Wellington Street, a Regional Road, there are rules coming down from York Region allowing traffic only to enter the building's parking lot from Wellington Street, leaving the Centre Street entrance also the only exit.

"It is fine when this was a single residence, but now there is going to be 43 people living there and I suspect the amount of traffic going in and out is going to be far more significant than the house before," said Councillor Chris Ballard. "We will look at how the plan is laid out to mitigate that. I too have concerns about the amount of traffic this is going to have on Centre Street, but we have made those concerns [known] before."

Although Councillor Ballard said these concerns were nothing new when it came to this particular project, he echoed comments made by Councillor Evelyn Buck earlier in the evening that he hoped future residents eventually adopted a lifestyle leading them to get rid of cars and hop onto transit.

Bringing in people to actually live in Downtown Aurora was a right step in that regard, said Councillor Buck.

“The answer to reinvigorating the core of Town was residents coming again to live in the heart,” she said. “Pedestrians walking to and from stores, I believe, will come back into the core of the Town when we have a market for those residents, have a population ready to use the market in the Downtown Core.

“We approved additional units in [Centro] because the developers found that when they came to sell the units there was no demand for two bedroom units. The demand was for one bedroom units which automatically increases the amount of traffic, but it also means people have an option. They don't have a car, they can get where they want to go without a vehicle. That represents a great attraction to people so that they no longer have to worry about maintaining a car and paying for everything associated with it.”