

Rental apartments planned for Wellington and John West Way

By Brock Weir

Over 130 rental apartment units are planned for the northeast corner of John West Way and Wellington Street East.

Designs for the proposed six storey apartment complex were unveiled at Council last week, planned for a plot of land originally slated for a one storey strip plaza.

While the originally proposed plaza raised the ire of some Councillors who argued that it was not in keeping with the vision of the Aurora Promenade Plan while others argued it was 'the best Aurora is going to get' after previous landowners said the land's soil wouldn't support anything larger, the new landowners have a much grander vision.

'The property is designated Promenade General and there are a range of uses permitted within that designation,' said planning consultant Murray Evans on behalf of the landowners. 'The essence of that designation, as it runs along Yonge Street and along Wellington, is to encourage more intense or appropriate forms of development to activate the street and use that promenade location. A six storey rental apartment building would be more appropriate implementing the objectives you have in your OP (Official Plan). It is our objective to comply with the policies as far as height, density, unit counts, and also the design guidelines of how to create attractive streets, and connections to the valley systems. We believe we are reinstating what was originally envisioned for this site.' The area is currently designated for five storeys, with an additional story possible through bonusing; that is, a bonus to the builder for amenities that benefit the whole community. These bonusing opportunities, from Mr. Evans' perspective, include connections into local valley lands as well as street art.

'There are 132 units and 80 per cent of the parking spaces will be underground, so we're trying to create a more attractive site,' he said. 'We have a range of one, two and three bedroom housing [units] and the proposed unit sizes now range between 800 and 1,500 square feet.'

While other proposed zoning amendment applications were voted down by Council last week, including proposals for lands at 100 Tyler Street and 34-46 George Street, as well as 103,107 and 111 Metcalfe Street, pending a comprehensive Aurora-wide bylaw review, Councillors greeted this plan enthusiastically.

'Compared to [the plaza] this actually looks like a fantasy,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who was one of the most vocal opponents of the original plan, questioning whether soil testing has confirmed whether the land can support a building of this size. Testing is ongoing, said Mr. Evans.

Councillors as a whole, however, sensed an opportunity.

Along with those bonusing possibilities, lawmakers said they would like to explore an increased emphasis on affordable housing units within the plan.

'We have had many conversations around the table regarding affordable housing in Aurora and there is a need for more affordable rental units,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'I think we are all concerned with what the benefit to the community is when we look at development applications. I know that rental units and certainly more affordable rental units are what we always come back to.'

Added Councillor John Abel: 'I am looking for a groundbreaking rental unit. I am looking forward to something along those lines and getting a bit more detail.'

In response, Mr. Evans said his client is always open to ongoing dialogue. It is a matter of how you achieve those units, he said, and what is affordable.

'Quite honestly, my client's vision is for the [downsizing] element of the Town,' he said. 'Certainly that would be on the table through any part of the discussion.'

Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, assured Council that affordable rental units can 'certainly' be on the table when discussions turn to the zoning and site plan stage, particularly if they indeed seek an increase in height.

'We could nail those down through the zoning bylaw and a special agreement,' he said. 'That would be tied into the zoning bylaw and future site plan agreement.'