

United Church hopes to break ground on new home this Spring

By Brock Weir

They have been without a true spiritual home to call their own since a devastating pre-Easter fire in April 2014 burned Aurora United Church to the ground; now, the Aurora United Church congregation is hoping to be able to break ground on their future as early as this spring.

Last week, the Aurora United Church (AUC) Building Committee formally completed and filed their planning application with the Town of Aurora to transform their historic site on Yonge Street, at the northeast corner of Tyler Street, into a new 'modern' two-storey church, and adjacent nine-storey retirement home towards Temperance Street, that will be a 'focal point' for the community.

'A lot of glass, and that is basically all I want to say at this point,' says Brian North, Chair of the AUC's Building Committee. 'It is very inviting.'

Mr. North, on behalf of the Committee, was making the rounds on Monday delivering letters to homes and businesses in the vicinity of the once-and-future church site informing them of the completed application. Now that it has been filed, the application will be aired soon at a Public Planning Meeting.

Marco Ramunno, Director of Planning for the Town of Aurora, says the plan could be on the agenda for public review and comment as early as February's Public Planning Meeting, currently set for Wednesday, February 22, at 7 p.m., in Council Chambers but will more likely be on the March 22 Public Planning agenda, set to get underway in the same place at the same time.

'We are hoping it is approved within three months,' says Mr. North. 'If it is approved, we would like to be digging at any time. We have done most of our preliminary studies for the archaeological things like that, so we are well on our way. The community has a say in this too. Once the community has a good look at it, hopefully we will get the green light to move forward. I really, truly believe [the new building] will be a focal point for Aurora.'

In the immediate aftermath of the church fire, Trinity Anglican Church on nearby Victoria Street immediately stepped up to the plate with an offer to share their space with the AUC. They have shared their spiritual space since then, forging a unique partnership in the community.

But, AUC has always wanted to return home 'and when it is said and done their spiritual home will be markedly different.

Working in partnership with Southbound Developments Ltd with designs by Robert Murphy Architects, the finished product will take the Yonge Street lot, as well as 55 & 57 Temperance Street and 12 & 16 Tyler Street and transform it into a church and retirement building complex, the latter of which will share 'a degree' of the Yonge Street frontage.

The retirement home will lease the land from the AUC under the terms of a long standing lease agreement, providing 'sustainability' to the church in the decades ahead.

'We are partnering with them on the build, but the United Church will not have any management say in the running of the retirement centre,' says Mr. North. 'The leasing of the land will go along Temperance Street up to Yonge and to help sustain the church hopefully for many years.'

'The new church is going to look like a church, but it is going to be modernized so that future generations can enjoy it. We have talked to all those from our past and it is very important to keep that spiritual feeling to the church, so we are working on doing that and, at the same time, making it inviting for future generations. It will be very inviting for the Town of Aurora, very inviting for the Downtown Core. It is, in my eyes, going to be a real core centre of Town and I think it is going to be a showpiece that is going to draw a lot of people to Aurora.'

'What I am most looking forward to is getting onto the next stage. I want to see shovels hit the ground. I want to see the hoarding go up and see the home for the congregation built again. We want to make it a long-lasting, sustainable building, not just something that will be up there for 10 or 15 years. We are trying to make it so future generations can afford to keep it.'