

United Church, retirement home development approved



By Brock Weir

Aurora United Church is almost set to rebuild.

Council last week paved the way for a two-storey church and associated seven-storey retirement home complex – six storeys from Yonge Street frontage – to be rebuilt on its historic home at the corner of Tyler Street.

Tuesday's approval clears the controversial height of the Amica seniors' resident and now the only thing standing between Aurora United Church and a formal ground-breaking will be a site plan approval expected this fall.

The plan was approved 6 – 2 with Councillors John Abel and Wendy Gaertner the dissenting voices.

From their perspective, the plan was not in keeping with either the heritage neighbourhood on adjacent Tyler and Temperance Streets, nor in keeping with Aurora's vision for the historic Yonge Street core.

"I am fully in support of rebuilding Aurora United Church," said Councillor Abel, who said not enough effort had been made by the developer to meet with neighbours from surrounding areas who had a number of concerns, particularly with the height and massing of the proposed complex. "[This] is in a sensitive area and it should be embraced and good for the community. I would like to see a solution going forward where the Ratepayers' Association (Aurora Village Ratepayers Association) came in before Council and said they were in support of the application.

"It always concerns me when we don't have that. It means it can be held up at an (Ontario Municipal Board) meeting and we don't want that."

Looking over the application, and the comments received earlier on behalf of the Ratepayers' Association, Councillor Gaertner said this is "one of the most difficult decisions" she has had to make as a Councillor. While Aurora United Church "suffered a great tragedy" and everyone wants to see them rebuilt on the land that was once their "spiritual home," she said she saw challenges with the proposal.

"The church property is in our historic area, a very important area for the Town, and I was extremely disappointed last week when the developer did not present an approved plan options that would have kept the United Church viable, but would have respected our downtown heritage and the adjacent heritage residential area," she said.

"The Downtown has been protected as a heritage resource area through 30 years of Official Plans (OPs) endorsed by many councils and Aurora does have planning in place, planning criteria to ensure the character of this historic part of Yonge Street is honoured. There is also criteria there to ensure that the height and the size of new development does not overwhelm the heritage. To me, this development should not be based on emotion, it should not be based on politics. It is a planning decision. We have an OP that speaks to this area. In my opinion, the proposal is not in keeping with the requirements of our planning documents, does not uphold the

vision for this area, and I don't believe it is in the best interests of the Aurora community.?

The majority of Council, however, strongly disagreed with this assessment, assured by Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, that the proposal, in his opinion, was based on ?good planning.?

Many members said the proposal should be looked at in a larger context, and not just on this one corner of the downtown core.

?It will be a significant but at the same time we were entrusted with making a decision that is for the benefit of the community as a whole,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I do believe that there is a benefit to the community. I think the re-establishment of the church provides a significant benefit to the community. I think we all recognize the services and support that they have provided over the years to this community as well as some of the amenities and so forth about supporting the downtown revitalization. But I also support the recommendation of our staff.

?We have our director of planning, who in his professional expertise, has said this is acceptable, that it is worthy of an amendment to our official plan and zoning bylaws and he believes it is good planning. Based on the benefit to the community and our staff's recommendation, I will be supporting the recommendation.?

Similar views were offered by Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Jeff Thom.

?I think it is the right solution in the right place at the right time,? said Mayor Dawe. ?I do believe that the developer has been working very diligently to make changes to become a better fit for the neighbourhood and it is obviously incremental. Our obligation, as members of Council, is to listen to all the information we get, to read the reports, and to quiz Mr. Ramunno, which we all do on a fairly regular basis, and to make a decision we feel is in the best interests of the Town as a whole and that is our obligation. That is not an easy obligation and I think that is pretty evident from the amount of time that we have spent discussing this particular issue.?

Added Councillor Thom: ?I do believe that the United Church wants to be a good neighbour and the ratepayers have their best interests in mind. We want to have the Town's best interests in mind as well. We all come from a place of trying to make our community a better place and trying to do what's best for our community. I think we still have the opportunity to do that moving forward. This amendment is something that is within the realm of good planning and this also gives us the opportunity to allow the United Church to reclaim their spot on Yonge Street and be a focal point for our downtown as they have been for over a century.?