

Yonge and Murray redevelopment in Tribunal's hands



The future of a proposed mixed-use development on the southwest corner of Yonge Street and Murray Drive is now in the hands of the Ontario Land Tribunal.

On Friday, Mayor Tom Mrakas announced that the property owner, Smart Centres, had appealed Council's decision on the multi-storey residential and commercial complex on land currently occupied by the former Canadian Tire store, which was most recently before lawmakers last month.

At the Public Planning meeting in question, Councillors voted to send the proposal to a future meeting so residents' concerns would be addressed. It was not a unanimous decision, however, with Mayor Mrakas and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim pressing instead to move the plan to a General Committee meeting to keep momentum going.

"Smart Centres have been great corporate partners in the past and in other sections of Town and I hope we will continue the dialogue into the next planning session," said Councillor Kim at the time, with Mayor Mrakas noting that he viewed advancing the proposal to the next level would not only keep the dialogue going, but maintain the Town's ability to have a say in the planning process.

Those options were taken off the table last week as the Ontario Land Tribunal (OLT) will now have the ultimate say in how the proposed development of two seven-storey blocks with retail on the ground level, and two further blocks of five stories, each separated by a linear park, would proceed.

"This is unfortunate, but not expected," said Mayor Mrakas last week. "During the Public Planning meeting, I had stated that in the best interests of the Town and with a goal towards ensuring positive growth, we should continue moving forward and working with the applicant to achieve the best outcome for the Town. However, now that the appeal has been filed, an unelected and unaccountable provincial body will make the decision for us. We will not be able to work with the applicant in the same positive manner.

"As I said at the table, while there is still work to be done on this application to address residents' and Council's concerns, I believed that we should have continued forward through the process; proceeding to a General Committee while continuing to work with the applicant to resolve any issues that our residents and Council have. By following this process, we could have advocated for more retail space, more greenspace, and possibly more parking. But now we will get whatever the Tribunal thinks is best for Aurora."

Several reasons why the plan as proposed might not be the best fit for Aurora were voiced in Council Chambers by elected officials and members of the public alike.

Among them were population density as it relates to the surrounding neighbourhoods, particularly the Mosaics community just behind the existing commercial block, as well as the view that plans for the southwest block should be looked at in conjunction with SmartCentres' plans for the other three corners of Yonge and Murray - plans for which have yet to hit the Council table and are not expected to be fleshed out for some time.

“This represents a significant development at one of the four corners,” said former Aurora councillor and former Ontario cabinet minister Chris Ballard, who delegated to the last Public Planning meeting on behalf of the Regency Acres Ratepayers Association. “In the next few years, Murray and Yonge Street will be developed and our concern is each is considered independent, in a vacuum, from another that there will be incongruity in terms of use, design and density.”

These sentiments were echoed by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said that while she was pleased builders had brought environmentally-friendly building elements into their plan, more needed to be done to ensure it was built as a “complete community.”

“We need to show that we care about the community, and we do,” she said. “What we do here is going to be a precedent for the other three corners and all the way up Yonge Street, north to [St. Andrew's Village]. We have to be very careful, and very smart and creative about this plan.”

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