

Affordable housing delays Wellington & Industrial redevelopment

By Brock Weir

It has been a destination for craftsman for decades, but the northeast corner of Wellington Street and Industrial Parkway North, currently home to Royal Wood Working, could soon be transformed into a residential complex with two eight storey towers. Plans for the redevelopment proposal, known as Metropolitan Square, were brought forward for consideration at Council last month, but developers' attempts to secure an amendment to the Town's Official Plan to allow for buildings three storeys above the limit hit a snag over how much of the building will be dedicated to affordable housing.

The property owners propose two eight storey condominium towers joined by a common lobby area. If approved as-is, it would bring a total of 223 residential condominium units to the site, along with two levels of underground parking, all accessed off Industrial Parkway North near Centre Street.

In order for the developers to get approval on the extra storeys, they will have to go through an exercise called 'bonusing' where significant amendments to the Official Plan (OP) are allowed in a trade-off for some community benefit.

These community benefits often include provisions for public parkland or other forms of amenity space, but the developers behind the Industrial Parkway/Wellington proposal were hoping to achieve this through 10 units of affordable rental housing within the building for a time period of 15 years.

'We have received very favourable comments from the Town's peer review architect,' said Angela Sciberras on behalf of the developer. 'We have been back and forth with them and they have provided a considerable amount of input and the design of the building has been accommodated to address those comments. Approval by the committee and, ultimately, Council will allow us to continue that process. It will allow us to work with staff in preparation for the site plan agreement, finalization of the zoning bylaw, finalization of the affordable unit agreement, continuation of the LEED Silver certification and, most importantly, commencement of site plan remediation.'

But the affordable unit agreement between the developer and the Region of York spurred most of the Council members' comments. When asked by Councillor Michael Thompson how the public would benefit through bonusing, Ms. Sciberras underscored the affordable housing agreement.

'At the beginning of the process, we went to the Region and met [with Housing Services] and worked with them to find out what their program was and worked out the parameters with them,' she continued. 'I think the planning department here at worked with the Town's appraiser in order to determine value to establish the number of units.'

This wasn't enough for some Councillors, however, who said that just 10 affordable housing units at the time of the build, units which could be potentially phased out to become mainstream condos after 15 years was not the deal the Town was looking for.

'Looking at other municipalities and what they're trying to do when it comes to affordable housing and rental units, looking at the fact we're going from five storeys to eight storeys, and we all know that, for the most part, this Council and previous Councils have held a firm line at a seven-storey building, I just don't think there needs to be a higher standard for that public benefit,' said Councillor Thompson. 'For me, the 10 units don't meet that standard. I would like to see a minimum of 10 per cent, or 22 units.' Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she echoed these comments.

'I am not sure why the Region does it that way, but 15 years is not an acceptable amount of time for me,' she said. 'This building, hopefully, will stand for many, many years, so to have 15 years of affordable housing is not acceptable to me.'

Councillor Jeff Thom also agreed, noting 'the Town and the community needs to get something more out of it' than just five per cent of the building dedicated to affordable housing which expires after 15 years.

'Is it architecturally pleasing to look at? Yeah, but there is just one problem: it is eight storeys,' added Councillor Tom Mrakas. 'It doesn't meet our height restrictions; it goes above and beyond. It doesn't even go above just with the bonusing of one [storey]; it is asking for three extra stories. I might remind everyone that it isn't just three extra storeys, it is three extra storeys for each building. In essence, it is six extra storeys.'

'At the end of the day, we do have a height restriction and right now currently what sits there is one storey commercial. Five storeys is intensification, so by going to what our plans are within our Official Plan is intensifying the area, we all agree it is an area to allow for intensification. Five storeys allows for that, so I think we need to uphold our Official Plan and our height restriction and move forward in that direction.'

'At the end of the day I don't see a clear benefit to the community. There is none. Allowing 10 units for rental, affordable housing that is going to disappear after 15 years, are the two storeys going to disappear after 15 years? No. It is up to us to make sure we

uphold that line and we uphold our Official Plan.?

Council reaffirmed its decision to send the matter back to staff to address their concerns in a future report.