

Apartment proposal spurs concerns about Sheppard's Bush

A proposal to redevelop a corner of Industry and Mary Streets for purpose-built rental units has sparked concerns on its impact to both Mary Street and the adjacent Sheppard's Bush Conservation Area.

The plan for a seven-storey apartment building of 97 units for a lot currently occupied by a single-storey industrial unit and a tennis court was before Council at last week's Public Planning meeting but with just 71 parking spots earmarked as part of the proposal, residents questioned where any spillover parking would go.

The obvious answer, from their perspective, was the Mary Street access to Sheppard's Bush, an area which is already challenged by commuters claiming spaces before getting on the GO Train.

It's important that the Town and Council look at this very carefully about the impact on the zoning change and build on the environment, parking, traffic and the integrity of surrounding building structures during the build before agreeing to proceed with this amendment and ultimate build, said resident Cheryl Bain.

Sheppard's Bush Conservation Area is a 26-hectare natural resource, a gem in the heart of Aurora donated to be preserved for the enjoyment of Aurora residents. It is home to many diverse wildlife as well. It is accessed from the south by way of Industry Street what steps will be put in place to ensure that this natural resource is not put in jeopardy by rezoning and the allowing of this seven-story building at its cusp. Parking is going to be another concern. Although the proximity to the GO Train station may persuade some to use this form of transportation, in reality it would not be the majority. This could equate to 200 or more cars to park somewhere.

Where will all these cars park? The Sheppard's Bush parking lot will be a prime location for them, which would not allow parking for patrons of Sheppard's Bush. Other surrounding areas will also be continuously filled with parked cars on Industry Street, Mary Street, and also cars on surrounding business parking lots. Hand in hand with parking, comes traffic congestion. This will be a safety issue with the proposed build and the increased number of cars on the road each day trying to get out of Industry Street onto Mary Street.

Mary Street was once a dead-end street, which served as a degree of traffic control, she said, a view which was shared by another resident who delegated to the meeting.

Keith Bennett, a resident of Mary Street for more than 30 years, said he has seen traffic grow exponentially in the intervening years.

You need a lot of patience as it is right now, he said of trying to back out of his driveway. Although there is a sign there saying No Heavy Trucks, they are there constantly. Somebody has allowed GO Buses on Mary Street now and traffic is crazy.

While Council did not make a decision on the proposal, they welcomed the chance for it to come back to a future Public Planning meeting to address residents' concerns.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo said it would be good to look at redevelopment in this area as a holistic rather than piecemeal approach, a view shared by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who pointed out that that is on existing property owners.

With that said, however, she said she was impressed that the proposal was being brought forward as purpose-built rentals.

We desperately need that type of development in our community, she said. Being in the MTSA (Major Transit Station Area) I actually look at this application and wish it was more intensified.

On the issue of traffic and its impact on Sheppard's Bush, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said he shared the concerns over the 'overflow' and the impact this would have on community members as a whole looking for a place to park while enjoying the greenspace.

'Sheppard's Bush is a community asset that gets well-utilized and we don't want to see anything that limits access to it,' he said. 'I know it is kind of a little bit outside of the scope of the application, but at the same time it is impactful. It needs to have some consideration about how we can ensure Sheppard's Bush remains open to the greater community as well and not as a result of lack of parking.'

'One of the unique aspects of this application is it borders or is adjacent to Sheppard's Bush. While environmental studies are always part of the planning process, as mentioned by one of the residents, are there additional steps or more that we can do through this process to ensure this development does not negatively impact Sheppard's Bush and the utilization of that area by the greater community.'

A similar view was offered by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, who added: 'This is an ideal place for purpose-built rentals. At the same time, we have to balance that with honouring and protecting whatever environmental land that exists adjacent to it, which is Sheppard's Bush.'

Director of Planning Marco Ramunno told Council that parking and traffic studies will take place before the next meeting to make sure there is no 'detrimental' impact on the area. He also noted that parking could turn into a bylaw enforcement issue.

'There are also warning clauses we can introduce to the future site plan and in those agreements to warn residents that the Sheppard's Bush is not a public parking zone or should not be used for visitor parking for the tenants of the building or owners of the building,' he said. 'These are comments that we'll take under review and moving forward, but we do have natural heritage review and geotechnical studies that will have to be reviewed to ensure there is no detrimental impact to the woodland edge [of Sheppard's Bush].'

Taking in the feedback from Council and members of the Public, Mayor Tom Mrakas said he hoped the applicants 'heard loud and clear' what they would like to see with the application.

By Brock Weir