

Business park set to move forward with auto dealerships, self-storage

The next phase of Smart Centres' footprint in Aurora near Wellington and Highway 404 is set to move forward next week.

Council is poised to give the final sign off on amendments to the Town's Official Plan to pave the way for the development after signalling their approval at the Committee level earlier this month.

Their approval will allow new uses on the site, which was previously designed for specific use as a business park. Changes include two auto dealerships, including a new BMW showroom and a multi-storey self-storage building, SmartStop, which also offers flexible office space.

A retail block of three buildings on the southeast corner of Wellington and the future Goulding Avenue, just east of Leslie Street, is also part of the revised plan.

Smart Centres currently owns more than 110 acres of land in Aurora and has built over 575,000 square feet of space, said Allan Scully, Vice President of Development for Smart Centres, pitching the amendments to Council, noting that last year they paid more than \$2.7 million in local property taxes.

Mr. Scully said he supported the recommendations put forward by staff, which reflect comments previously raised by lawmakers.

The BMW dealership and the SmartStop will be the only additional uses permitted on the business park lands by way of this application, he said, adding that the parcel of land in question is 32.5 acres, with the two buildings accounting for only four-and-a-half acres. There is ample room on site to build out the business parklands as envisioned by the Town. We have started construction of Goulding and this internal road on the hope that this Committee and Council will approve the application. To meet BMW and SmartStop's timelines, we need to complete the road grading work prior to winter so we can then come back in the early spring to complete Goulding and commence construction on the buildings themselves.

The value of the two deals, he said, amounts to \$7 million and both BMW and SmartStop need to be part of the plan.

I can tell you we are in advanced discussions with a local tech firm who are interested in locating on the lands immediately east of the proposed Smart Stop, Mr. Scully added. While I do understand they are looking at one other site which may or may not be in Aurora, I am hopeful, I am confident we will be successful in bringing them to this site and keeping them in Aurora, but again without Goulding Avenue we won't be able to proceed with this opportunity.

Once complete, he concluded, the development could bring in \$2.96 million in property taxes each year based on current rates.

Although Council approved the application at the Committee level this month, the approval did not come without question.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, for instance, said she was a little wary of such a large chunk of the development being allocated to retail as the land was intended on bringing good jobs (defined as full time jobs with pensions) to the community.

The whole point of a designated business area is to attract those jobs that will, at least it was Aurora's intent, to attract jobs that are full-time with benefits and pension, she said. That is not what's going to be happening here.

David Waters, Planner for the Town of Aurora, said there has been debate over the definition of a job within the context of employment lands.

It doesn't really depend on benefits and what have you, he said. I think what is important to remember in this development is the official plan target is 40 jobs per hectare. This development is going to contribute over 100 jobs per hectare to the Town's economy.

Councillor Michael Thompson, on the other hand, said he was in support of the application and said that the intent of the land has evolved over the last 10 years since the Official Plan was approved.

“The hope was as they expanded the lands to the eastern part that it would bring in more office buildings before more retail and really that is what brings us here today. I am sure that the applicants have tried their best to attract employment jobs and office settings and so forth to the lands, but as we have talked about last time and the time before this, it is not an easy challenge,” he said.

“We’re left to deal with what is before us tonight. From my perspective, I appreciate the work that staff and the applicant have done. As we all know, this application came to us in February under the Planning Act, we have 120 days to render a decision. We’re well past that, but the applicant and staff have continued to work to address some of the concerns raised by myself and other members of Council and it is before us tonight to make a decision. I appreciate some of the changes they have made to make it a little more acceptable ? in my eyes ? and to adhere to some of the concepts and tenets we talked about back in 2010 in terms of how much retail there is going to be and [making sure] we still had room for future office.”

Support was also offered by Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who singled out the flexible office space as a “forward-thinking” measure in light of COVID-19, as well as Councillor Sandra Humfries who saw the benefit in construction jobs that will come from the build, and Councillor Harold Kim who cited the potential for further offices in the area.

“We’re looking at 100 jobs per hectare, also the possibility of a tech company headquarters being located here and the applicant is saying they are confident in that,” added Mayor Mrakas. “I am looking forward to that coming to fruition. When you look at what is estimated, it is the taxes that would be coming in off this property. \$2.9 million a year in taxes. We always talk about an employment or a commercial-base to alleviate the burden on the residential portion of the tax base, this is important to help provide that alleviation to the residents. The ratio between the employment and commercial? this is going to go a long way in helping that. It is encouraging to see, I’m looking forward to it, I am looking forward to a lot of jobs coming into the area.”

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