

Debate over Centre Street development crossed a line, Councillor contends

Delegations from developers and Centre Street residents over a proposed tri-plex in Aurora's Heritage Conservation crossed a line in decorum, according to Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Councillor Gaertner last week expressed her dismay over words put into the public record by neighbours against the property owner in question at the previous week's General Committee meeting.

At issue is a proposal to transform 74 Centre Street into a two-storey triplex, a plan which has raised concerns within the surrounding neighbourhood, including matters of footprint, massing and density.

Despite their concerns, however, the proposal, which has been modified to reflect changes requested by local committees and resident groups, has received support from municipal planning staff and, largely, from members of the Town of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee.

But Council has been a different story, with members divided over whether or not the proposal as it stands fits into the historic character of the community.

Sitting at the Committee level on November 16, Council referred the proposal back to staff for further input, a decision held up at last week's Council meeting but not before Councillor Gaertner expressed her concerns over how the file has been handled.

"I did say if Council didn't approve the report we would be setting a very bad precedent, but I didn't say why," said Councillor Gaertner on November 23, referencing the earlier meeting. "Staff recommended this application to Council and it has been modified according to all their concerns and those of the Design Review Panel, the Committee of Adjustment, the Heritage Advisory Committee, the guidelines of the District Plan, and staff have said it is compatible with the neighbourhood and it is good planning and an appropriate use of [zoning] to allow residents to prevail on what good planning is, despite all of the professionals' comments and volunteers' comments, it is completely contrary to our planning policy and our planning process."

Reviewing the November 16 meeting, Councillor Gaertner said several comments made during the meeting "really caught my attention" including residents' claims that the "developer will simply say whatever he thinks will get him what he wants."

"Those comments are not acceptable comments in our Council chambers," she continued, offering her apologies to the proponents. "I am saddened myself I didn't stand up to stop it. I am not going to let that happen again. Anybody who comes to our Council Chamber in good faith needs to be respected and to not be disparaged. It was a very difficult meeting to re-watch."

These views were shared by Councillor John Gallo, who expressed some surprise at Councillor Gaertner's strong views on the matter.

"I will note in nine years of sitting on Council with Councillor Gaertner, I don't think I have ever once seen her not that she doesn't like developers but defend a developer, and she is defending statements against the developer. Not that she is against them, but when she speaks like that, I pay attention because I know where she stands. I thank her for that and I too felt bad that things were said that should have been stopped, or whether they can add to the discussion or at least help me make decisions."

Councillor Sandra Humfries agreed the comments "may have gone too far" and conceded "emotions came into play."

Mayor Tom Mrakas, who chaired the meeting in question, however, defended Council's decision to send the matter back to staff.

"This actually doesn't conform to our Heritage Plan," he said, putting specific emphasis on scale, massing, a lack of a side yard driveway in the proposal and shortcomings in rear yard amenity space, elements he said were key parts of the plan.

'Heritage trumps planning,' he said. 'It specifically states in our Heritage Plan [?] that policies and guidelines included in the Heritage Plan, which further refines standards established in the zoning bylaw to ensure compatibility with the Heritage District context, not 'may', shall prevail under the authority provided [under] the Ontario Heritage Act.

'I understand that staff recommend this, and I understand the Heritage Committee might have been somewhat in favour of this, I understand that the Design Review Panel might have been in favour of this, Council is the authority in decision-making with regards to heritage and with regards to planning. This does not conform and all we're asking for is to go back and rework this and come back with a plan that does conform and that we can all agree on.

'I think all of us would be happy to approve something that will provide more housing, that would bring in possibly more rentals, but would fit within the character of the community and conform with our Heritage District Plan. I think that is all we're trying to do here.'

Nevertheless, Councillor Gaertner pointed out a very similar triplex proposal in the same area was approved by Council little over a year ago.

'A triplex is allowed, there were no objections last time,' she said. 'With respect to staff, when staff is following planning policy, including environmental planning policy, I have no beef.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter