

Downtown townhouse development lacks affordable, accessible options: resident

By Brock Weir

A development of 126 stacked townhouses on Yonge Street just north of the Wellington Street intersection was formally approved by Council last week, following concerns from a local realtor that there were not enough accessible and affordable options to meet the demands of the community.

The development is slated for the vacant lot on the west side of Yonge Street next to the Dollarama, which, until its demolition last year, had been a grocery store, most recently serving as Liquidation World.

Initially slated to be a condominium development consisting of retail space on the ground level and condo units above, the plan was changed after developers, according to reports from Aurora's Planning Department, couldn't make a business case for the retail.

Nevertheless, the housing project marches on but for Aurora-based realtor Beverley Varcoe, the plan falls well short of the mark.

"The Town has a growing demographic of seniors, but not enough affordable, accessible housing," she told Council members as a delegate at last week's meeting. "The preferred choice is a high-rise condominium and apartment building with elevators, underground parking and a central location. The Town has numerous retirement and nursing homes but we have a vibrant, active seniors segment of the population that has about 20 years or more before they need extended care housing. Aurora has not planned for the housing in this middle senior age bracket and it is a huge segment of the future demographics of Aurora."

But it's not just in danger of missing the boat on the seniors demographic, she added.

"Aurora is losing the entire demographics of 30 and 40 year olds because of the lack of affordable housing," said Ms. Varcoe. "Young people and families who grew up here cannot afford to stay here. There is a huge migration moving north. Aurora needs to look at the Downtown Core of Barrie. The Town has been building high density apartments for a number of years. They now have a vibrant, busy downtown core for seniors, first time buyers and young families. In conclusion, I believe the Downtown Core needs a type of high rise condominium building that is on the site selection of accessible units in an affordable price range."

Following her comments, several Councillors said they agreed with many of her points and sought assurances from Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, that there will be accommodations made for potential buyers looking for that accessible option.

He said developers were willing to work with buyers in accommodating their needs through external chair lifts and other options. While these assurances made Councillors more comfortable with the plan it was far from an easy sell.

"I am of the belief we should be looking at that path of accessibility in everything we do in our design, whether it is the Promenade study or intensification, I find excluding all those with any physical barriers [is something] I am just not in favour of [in intensifying] our Downtown," said Councillor John Abel. "Our future in the Downtown is inclusive and I think everything going forward should always bear that in mind."

Councillor Harold Kim offered a counterpoint, agreeing the need for affordable housing is one of the "biggest comments" they hear around the table.

"Adding elevators will certainly add to that cost," he said. "In this economic climate, you can't just have it all and part of affordable housing is ensuring that it is cost-effective, it is a pleasant place to live, and each housing type is geared towards certain segments. Although I appreciate that in an ideal world it would certainly have an elevator, we can't have all townhouses going forward having elevators because there are many potential customers that don't require it."

In the end, Councillors Abel and Wendy Gaertner voted against the plan, while others said this was the best option for the site.

?I think it is great the developer is actually willing to work with anyone that is looking to buy into the development and work with them in providing any accessibility features,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas. ?I am not sure what more we can ask for. When this was first brought forward to us at public planning, I think all of us had certain concerns that some of us wanted to see a little more of a commercial aspect. I know I did. Then we learn from the applicant that it is just not viable and it would bring down the rest of the commercial stores in the core. This is going to bring in people.?

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: ?I am glad that we have at least made attempts with the developer to try and see if there was a possibility moving forward [with retail]. It is unfortunate it wasn't possible, but what we have before us is reasonable and I will be in support of it.?