

Four-storey retirement home plan alarms southwest neighbours

By Brock Weir

Residents in southwest Aurora say they were surprised to discover a four-storey addition to a neighbourhood retirement home could soon dwarf the surrounding homes after not being notified the plan was making its way through Town Hall.

Councillors have deferred a decision on a site plan approval which would allow the Aurora Retirement Residence at Murray and Seton, formerly Kingsway Arms, to significantly expand their operations with a four-storey addition onto the rear of the existing two-storey care home.

The addition, if the site plan is ultimately approved by the Town's Committee of Adjustment before hitting the Council table for approval once again, will bring an additional 78 units to Aurora.

'We only found out about it last Friday,' said area neighbour Nancee Webb, following last week's General Committee meeting. 'We were lucky Councillor Wendy Gaertner came around because they have absolutely no obligation to let any resident know because it isn't a change in zoning, which I find absolutely horrific that things like that could get through without knowing.'

This was confirmed to be the case at last week's meeting by Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, who said the property owners have been working on the plan since May and enough time has passed since the application was filed at Town Hall that the proponents could take the matter to the Ontario Municipal Board.

'They are very anxious,' said Mr. Ramunno. 'There is a need for additional suites in Town and they are anxious to proceed to construction.'

Councillors, on the other hand, were nevertheless anxious about the size of the proposed addition.

'When I first saw the site plan, I was pretty shocked because I was thinking if I was a resident in this neighbourhood and it was going to be abutting my property I would be pretty upset,' said Councillor Gaertner, noting the plan includes a new driveway close to the back yards of existing properties to allow access for garbage trucks. 'I don't believe this complies with the intent of the stable neighbourhood policy in our Official Plan.'

Mr. Ramunno, however, said he believes the plan does conform to the Town's Official Plan (OP) while buffers and other measures would be in place to minimize the impact on the surrounding neighbourhood. But, for Councillor Gaertner, the primary issue remained the size of the structure, along with reduced parking requirements which, she said, could negatively impact the surrounding streets.

'I understand that our zoning is allowing for eight storeys but in this area to me is a little bit ridiculous. We're in a residential area. The next thing you know we're going to be looking to build a condo in Golf Links!?' said Councillor Tom Mrakas, tongue in cheek, referencing the 10-storey condo proposed for the former Highland Gate golf course currently before the Ontario Municipal Board.

Councillor Mrakas also questioned why, if the application was received by the Town on May 20, it was only before Councillors on September 6. While Mr. Ramunno said it takes 'some time' for their department to review the application and get comments back from different agencies on the plan 'such as a review from the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority and Central York Fire Services' and present them to Council.

'Maybe it would have helped if we had a couple of extra meetings during the summer,' Councillor Mrakas contended.

But, for some, that was beside the point as others questioned why this plan had hit Council before the Committee of Adjustment, which deals with variances. Mr. Ramunno said it is typically the practice to bring it before Council first so Committee members

have a 'comfort level' on where Council stands.

'[The site plan comes] before Council and any Committee of Adjustment applications with respect to variances would follow,' said Mr. Ramunno. 'They would need to be in effect before we could execute a site plan agreement and before construction could take place.'

'I am in favour of this coming to Council first because, as a number of Councillors have pointed out, we should be the first voice in decisions that happen in our Town,' added Mayor Geoff Dawe. 'Is there a better way of looking at how we handle site plan applications? This is obviously outside the public planning process, but I think there is probably a better way we can handle it.'

A better way might come from Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said she would be bringing forward a Notice of Motion that would mean neighbours would need to be informed of any construction or development slated for their neighbourhoods.