

George Street P.S. demolition affirmed by Council, but questions remain over new builds

The former George Street Public School building will be razed by the end of January 2025 as discussions begin on how the land will be used.

The future of the 115 George Street lands were in the spotlight last week as Council held a Public Planning meeting for resident input and discussions over next steps. These milestones include the park amenities set to take over the majority of the space, and how lands on the George Street edge will be divided for home development.

The Town purchased the site in April for \$10.72 million to address a significant deficit in parkland to serve current and future populations.

From the moment the ink was dry, it was intended to sever the western edge of the property for sale to recoup municipal funds used to secure the balance.

This intention was reaffirmed last week.

The concept presented to lawmakers included seven residential lots facing George Street, with depths between 211 and 214 feet, backing onto the future park, which will be accessed from the north end of the property.

This was in line with the vision of most Council members.

"I am happy to hear, for the most part, seven lots on that area is acceptable," said Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, outlining some of the background on how this opportunity came to be. "We had the first right of refusal to purchase it and the concept was sort of a bit of a change of the way in thinking in how most municipalities work: there's a piece of property we could buy and convert it into parkland and off you go. [But] we had the concept of let's try to somehow recoup some of the costs of that purchase so that there is less of an impact to the taxpayers and as long as it is in line with the community?"

"I certainly wouldn't be in favour of anything less than what is being proposed now."

A similar perspective was offered by Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, who said as it was initially going to take \$15 million to redevelop the property, it was important to recoup some of the costs.

"I did like the proposal to be able to not just try and make sure whatever is built here is compatible with the neighbourhood, but also try and ensure we're recouping some degree of that investment so we can minimize the cost," he said, noting he was in favour of seven units. "[Those were] two of the reasons behind me being supportive of pursuing this property."

Added Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim: "It was prudent of us to sell that block? to be prudent with our reserve management and we found seven lots was the best number of lots based on our information. All the existing lots were between 50- and 75-foot frontage and the lots that we're building now are between 51 and 71, so they are certainly comparable and seen [as] characteristic of the neighbourhood. We're very happy the majority of the residents are in agreement."

While Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she was in favour of severing the western edge of the land to recoup costs, she said she would like to see the total seven units reduced to six.

"I have had several emails ? at least a dozen ? and I would actually like to see these six, because that would reflect a minimum-70-foot lot frontage in that area and that would, in my opinion, really conform with the neighbourhood," she said, adding there is a 72-foot lot frontage on the opposite side of George, with wider frontages on adjacent streets.

?I am really happy we made this decision as Council to take control of these lands and be able to offset the property in the back to allow for some much-needed parkland and greenspace in the background. I look forward to the public consultation. How we end up dividing the property up top is yet to be determined but this step right now as we're approaching is to allow it to go to the Committee of the Whole to look further into how it is going to end up. I prefer to advocate for six because I feel it does conform with the surrounding area adjacent, south and so forth, and I am hoping that's where we'll end up, but I am more than happy to move forward to the next step.?

Whether the land in question is divided into seven lots or six, Council members sought assurances that mechanisms would be put in place to prevent an individual coming in and buying the totality of available lots in order to construct something bigger.

Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Development, said there are tools, such as how the sites are serviced, to maintain the vision.

?We're all trying to create compatibility while also balancing it with our duty to being fiscally responsible to the entire Town and all our residents,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas. ?I think that's where we're going. What's being proposed so far is a good start, we're going to work on it. I am confident that staff have not only heard our comments? but will continue to work with all of us to develop the right plan that fits for all of us, that keeps that compatibility but keeps us to be fiscally responsible to the Town and developing much-needed parkland.

?I am definitely looking forward to the park consultation in the first quarter of 2025 and I am looking forward to seeing this area developed in a way that is appropriate and aligns with the neighbouring community.?

By Brock Weir