

Grocery store, Marshalls, storage facility proposed for 404 and Wellington

Mashalls, Homesense, and a new Farm Boy grocery store could soon join a growing retail family at the southwest corner of Highway 404 and Wellington Street East.

Representatives for SmartCentres outlined their plans for a retail expansion of their existing development on the north side of Wellington Street at a Public Planning meeting last week.

If their plans come to fruition, the expansion will include new automotive dealerships as well as a four-storey indoor storage facility.

'We're proposing a mixed-use business park in a campus-style format,' said Nikolas Papapetrou of SmartCentres. 'The initial phase of the project, which consists of Farm Boy, Marshalls, Homesense, two motor vehicle sales establishments and the self-storage building would represent an initial investment in the community of almost \$100 million over the next two to three years.'

Following the presentation, however, Council expressed some misgivings over the storage facility and automotive components of the plan, particularly what these proposals might mean for local jobs.

Some of the land in question has been earmarked for prestige office space which, in turn, was intended to attract high quality, well-paying jobs.

For some Council members, retail and automotive didn't fit the bill.

'The idea was to set aside this very large piece of land so that we could bring good businesses to Aurora [and] we would be able to provide jobs [so] residents of Aurora could enjoy working and work closer to home,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner stating that, in her opinion, the proposal was contrary to the intent of the Official Plan. '[The intent was for] a business park and a prestige business park. To allow this is to dilute everything that we were trying to do.'

'This is not what we're looking for here. We were never looking for commercial and retail. We wanted this to be offices. We wanted to draw business to Aurora. This is just so contrary that I am almost speechless.'

Councillor Michael Thompson also expressed concerns, noting he questioned the numbers in the proposal as it relates to the number of jobs per hectare this development will provide the community. He also noted decisions made by previous Councils to reject grocery stores and auto dealerships for the subject lands.

‘Staff didn’t support a grocery store back in 2012, but that was then and this is now,’ he said, noting he was open to a dealership with 60 – 70 jobs. ‘A lot of it had to do with it being a gateway into Aurora. We wanted prestige and we were very concerned about transforming it into something else.’

Councillor John Gallo also expressed some reservations, stating his initial feeling is the proposal doesn’t fit the bill of what Council previously envisioned.

This was also the case for Councillor Kim, but he said his objection to the plan is primarily towards the proposed indoor storage facility.

‘You can have a storage facility anywhere,’ said Councillor Kim. ‘People don’t need a prestige location to store their products. They can go to Industrial Parkway. They can go to any other part of Town where there is an empty space – and there are some empty spaces. So, for me, I don’t think this is a wise use of space, valuable space, for storage because for storage you just need space.’

Planners behind the storage facility, however, pitched their plan as one that fits into the ‘new normal’ coming out of COVID-19, a reality where working from home is a new normal and entrepreneurs will need space to keep products and equipment outside the home.

‘There is a huge discussion going on with business and retail space and the cost, and if any of you work for large companies, we have all been working from home and there is a huge impact right now because work is getting done and it is cheaper for these businesses,’ said Councillor Sandra Humfries. ‘I think we need to be realistic that things are changing and there will be a lot of people working from home in the future. The work is getting done and businesses are going to save a ton of money. It is the reality of the future.’

Councillor Rachel Gilliland was of a similar view, adding: ‘It is interesting how that will develop the community. I think the way of the future is working from home [and] being innovative.’

While the plans as presented don’t entirely fit within the Council of the day’s vision for the land in the southwest quadrant of 404 and Wellington, Town Planner David Waters said the area has evolved as a gateway.

‘Given how Wellington has evolved between 404 and Leslie, I think this is keeping within character of the planned function,’ said Mr. Waters. ‘It may not have been intended to be that way back in the day, but through approvals that have been issued by previous Councils, it has developed into a mixed-use corridor and, in my opinion, it fits nicely with what is there today and actually compliments it.’

By Brock Weir