

Height will be hurdle for church redevelopment



By Brock Weir

Residents and Council members alike said they were "thrilled" last week with designs for a new Aurora United Church, but an adjacent retirement home that is integral to the rebuild plan could prove to be a significant stumbling block.

It was standing-room-only in Council Chambers last Wednesday as architects presented their plans for a new Aurora United Church and a nine-storey seniors' residence for Yonge and Tyler Streets to Council at a public planning meeting.

While all parties said they were largely pleased with the designs for the church itself, Council expressed significant reservations with the height of the proposed 159-unit Amica residence, planned to be built on church land on a 99-year lease deal.

"We are working for a number of clients for multiple objectives," said architect Robert Murphy. "We had to find a development partner to provide the financial strength for Aurora United Church to rebuild in a fashion that was remotely equal to what it had before. The church simply did not have the financial resources to be able to do that. Our intent was always to go to the market and look for a joint venture partner to assist in the development of the site."

Enter Amica.

According to Mr. Murphy, it was important to go down this path so Aurora United Church (AUC) had a stable source of revenue for the next 99 years, but it was also important to design the plan to meet the financial requirements of Amica and, given the number of units required, this would entail going up to nine storeys.

"We can all agree that we would love to see the church back where it should be," said Councillor Tom Mrakas. "My concerns are the height. We need to be flexible [with our Official Plan (OP)] but there are two items I think are the most important things when we look at any application that speaks to how unique our community is and that is the height and density."

As Aurora's Promenade Plan earmarks a five storey limit in this area, plus a bonus unit, Councillor Mrakas argued approving the plan as it stands could set a precedent and a ripple-effect across the community, leading to "high towers in the downtown core." Similar concerns were voiced by Councillors Jeff Thom and Michael Thompson.

"I applaud (AUC) for finding a partner to bring it to fruition, but I do share some of the concerns with regards to height restriction," said Councillor Thompson. "We have had a number of applications come forward recently asking for 10 storeys and we have pushed back on all of those. There is a concern in setting precedents and being consistent. It has been three years for the church; they have tried to manage, they are in a temporary location, and they have tried to move this project forward as quickly as they can doing all the proper steps. If it goes to a future public planning meeting, I want to make sure there are no delays."

It is important, he said, to have further engagement with the community to address outstanding issues, and that is what the proponents have agreed to.

Sarah Millar, a planner working on the project, said this was just the beginning in terms of community outreach.

"In a yes or no, [it is a] yes with the caveat that there is a building program that needs to be achieved," said Ms. Millar when asked if the proponents had any flexibility on the height. "There is a certain unit count that the development partner needs to achieve in order to make this project viable and constructed. That being said, the actual form of the building, we want to make it a project everyone can be proud of as a landmark for Yonge Street. If that form shifts and the unit count can still be achieved, yes."

A landmark is exactly what they have attempted to achieve on the land that has been home to a church for the better part of 150 years, most recently until April 2014 when the most recent Aurora United Church building burned to the ground after nearly 140 years as a centre of community life.

“When we talked about what the church should look like, [and whether] we should try and rebuild what we had before, we thought it was a great design for 140 years ago, but what does it look like now, and what will it look like in another 140 years?” said Mr. Murphy. “The (AUC) Building Committee wanted to have something that was a window onto itself and a window onto Yonge Street.”

A window onto itself, passers-by will be able to look into the transparent front of the building into a foyer focusing on stained glass windows salvaged from the original church.

“For us, we see this development proposal in that it redevelops an important community asset for Aurora, it re-establishes the church’s landmark status with a strong spire at Yonge Street and a strong terminus for the Mosley Street corridor. It provides new and needed housing choices within the Downtown Promenade Area. It provides community space within the Downtown Promenade area, improves streetscape and built form along Yonge Street in line with Promenade policies, improve the public ground on Tyler and Temperance with additional streetscaping, street trees, furniture, and it implements the vision of the promenade plan.”

Although members of the AUC Building Committee wanted to have shovels in the ground this April, that idea has been shifted to the backburner as the plan was sent back to another Public Planning committee next month. In the meantime, however, some Council members said they were eager not to lose momentum.

“I am absolutely thrilled that the church is going to be built again,” said Councillor John Abel. “I am just so excited for the congregation. It was a huge loss. I like the design and what they have taken in. The United Church has waited long enough and they are anxious to move forward. We are very excited to see this is coming forward. The fact they are partnering and making it a sustainable model is prudent and shows a well thought-out plan. The only concern is loud and clear and that is the size and scale of the building. I do want to see that addressed before I can move forward and support that.”

Added Mayor Geoff Dawe: “It has been a very good discussion. This concept is the right concept in the right place at the right time. I had the unfortunate experience of watching the old church burn down and I very much look forward to the new church being built. I believe that the consulting group has heard the concerns in terms of the massing or overpowering what is currently a very well established neighbourhood and I do believe they will take that under advisement and see how they can work with that. I believe we will be moving forward expeditiously.”