

John West Way apartment complex proposal rejected by Council



The future of a proposed six-storey apartment building for the northeast corner of John West Way and Wellington Street East could be in the hands of the Ontario Land Tribunal after Council voted down the plan last week.

Council defeated the plan on a vote of 3 ? 4, followed by a unanimous vote on the reasons why.

Reasons for the rejection sent to the developer include the plan's encroachment onto environmentally-sensitive lands and established floodplain, potential negative impacts to species of concern (including snapping turtles in the adjacent watershed), outstanding conditions from the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority on the long-term impacts of the proposal, lack of retail space, and inappropriate density.

This is not the first time a building has been proposed for the corner. The 2010 ? 2014 Council previously approved a one-storey retail plaza for the site, but that never materialized. The new proposal, said proponents, would bring more rental options to the community and, through the bonusing process, and result in contributions intended to improve nearby trails and other amenities.

Councillors came into last week's meeting with a cloud of uncertainty hanging over the project. When the proposal was last before them at the Committee level, Council voted down staff's recommendations but failed to bring forward any of their own.

At the start of last week's session, however, Councillor Harold Kim put a motion on the table to approve staff's initial recommendation to give the apartments the go-ahead.

?I think it is something that is much needed in that area of Town, however I do share concerns of some members of Council regarding the environmental impacts, the stormwater management plan, and I believe it was said there was a lack of information from the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority regarding the site plan,? he said.

Councillor Rachel Gilliland also signalled some support for the project, stating Aurora was ?trying to make sure we're making the best use of the development space we have in Aurora to attain that missing middle.? She also said she was supportive of many of the ecological improvements the proponents had suggested for the site, including the removal of invasive species from the stream lands north of the site and their replacement with native plants.

?At least there are some positive attributes,? she said. ?As much as we might not necessarily agree with this being the best spot, we have to give accolades in the sense that at least there are some contributions there ecologically we didn't have back in 2012,? she said, referring to the previous plaza proposal. ?The fact we will continue to have that same protected area in the back and planted with plants that actually make sense is a huge gain for us.

?Do we want to necessarily have a six-storey building that's in this specific spot? I guess that's a different debate, but right now we have a plan in front of us within the same kind of footprint, yet we had a discussion not too long ago about attainable housing, talking about the missing middle and how we needed some housing for people ? it's a delicate balance for us to find something that is affordable. I know some may argue what that term means, but we are in dire need of rental units as well and the reality is we have a plan here that accommodates that need and it accommodates on a piece of property that has already got approved development rights that they could walk away tomorrow and begin building.?

For Councillor Wendy Gaertner, however, the bottom line was simply the issue that, in her view, the proposal did not comply with the Town's Official Plan. (OP)

?The development is completely contrary to our OP's [Environmental Protection] section,? she said.

Strong views were also voiced by Councillors John Gallo and Michael Thompson.

In speaking against the plan, Councillor Gallo referenced a discussion earlier in that meeting on Mayor Mrakas' motion calling on the Province to abolish the Ontario Land Tribunal to bring more planning powers back to municipalities and suggested the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority should be looked at as well.

?The inconsistency from staff reports from 2012-2013 to 2022 are staggering and sometimes maybe we even have to look internally to understand why we have developers that get away with this kind of stuff,? said Councillor Gallo. ?It is still very unclear whether [the Conservation Authority] have approved this or not because they said they have approved it but there are so many conditions they are still looking for. It is very confusing and very difficult for me to make an informed decision based on the information that is in front of me.?

Councillor Thompson agreed that existing policies don't always reflect community goals.

?Provincial policies don't always align with what we're trying to do in our communities,? he said. ?We have always said the best people to decide what we want to build are the residents and those of us around the table who were elected by the residents.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter