

John West Way proposal in limbo pending Council decision

The future of a proposed six-storey apartment building for the northeast corner of John West Way and Wellington Street East could be decided this week.

Meeting at the Committee level on February 15, Council was unable to come to a clear consensus on the issue following delegations from residents concerned about the environmental impacts that the development could bring to habitats around the East Holland River. Additional concerns were voiced on behalf of residents of a townhouse complex immediately north of the proposed building site who feared earthworks required could cause erosion and damage their properties, which overlook a portion of the river valley.

At issue was a six-storey building of 150 residential units.

A mix of one-, two-, and three-bedroom suites priced at market rents, the property would include a green roof, at grade and below ground parking, and on-site water filtration.

‘The building is well-designed with themes of modern glass elements as well as traditional red brick components to match the character of the area,’ said consultant Joanna Fast to the proposal. ‘As required by the Official Plan, the building steps back at the sixth storey and has a different glass treatment to visually reduce the massing of the sixth storey. The proposal has a high-quality urban square featured at the corner [and] this is also consistent with the vision of the Official Plan.’

In pitching the proposal to Council, Ms. Fast recognized some concerns outlined by lawmakers, particularly Councillor John Gallo, at a Council meeting in January who expressed reservations that the building did not contain ground level retail, as required in Aurora's Promenade Plan.

‘As per the policies of the Official Plan, retail is encouraged in the Promenade General Designation but not required,’ she said. ‘With our applications, we submitted a market impact assessment which concluded the site is surrounded by convenience retail uses and the same type of convenience retail uses on the site would have trouble securing tenants since the area is already well-served by commercial plazas.’

‘It is consistent with Provincial, Regional and Town policy. It provides rental housing that will be marketed towards seniors and empty-nesters. It has a green roof, it provides the Town with very high-quality urban square at the corner that the Town and the Region commented exceeded their design standards. We're in an MTSA (Major Transit Station Area) where intensification should take place, and we're providing almost \$500,000 (\$489,000) in bonusing which will benefit the immediate area.’

Some of this bonusing includes money for improvements to Petch House, the removal of invasive species from the valley lands, and the re-planting of native vegetation.

Following the delegations and the presentation, however, Council's concerns were less about the lack of retail and more about the environmental impacts.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, for instance, said she was concerned about the impact on the area flood plain as well as proposed cuts on the east side of the river.

‘This could be terrible for residents,’ she said, addressing the slopes close to the townhouse development. ‘The report on this is from 2011. There could have been more erosion since then and I am scared for the residents. On Environmental Protection (EP) lands, if there is an existing building, that's okay, but it is all about passive uses and protection, and this is so far from that.’

‘We have an OP (Official Plan) that is very clear about EP and hazard lands that flood. How can we, despite what the Conservation Authority says, have an OP [and] we should be upholding our OP. How many times have we said that at the table? It is not

appropriate. I am afraid for the residents. I am afraid of their land sliding. The slope is increased [and?] there is just too much at stake here.?

Before a decision was made, more information needed to come forward from the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, Councillor Gallo agreed.

?This is a larger project than should be placed on the site,? he said, noting that a single-storey plaza previously approved for the site was 14,000 square feet versus the proposed 21,000 square foot footprint of the proposed apartment. ?There is a massive difference from what we approved a while ago. I am not convinced sitting here that there is going to be no negative impact on sensitive lands that are at least 85 per cent floodplain. To me, it just doesn't fit.

?I have repeated many times on the Council table I encourage development, high density, getting people in there so they can walk to the trains?stop urban sprawl and all of those reasons that I encourage higher density developments near public transportation corridors. It is a hallmark and something we really need to do. We can't just ignore some of the other things to let that happen. I am simply not there yet. There are too many unanswered questions to proceed.?

This was a refrain heard around the table as Councillor Michael Thompson called for further information to be brought forward to this week's Council meeting on what is allowed since Council approved the unrealized plaza for the site versus what was ultimately on the table now.

?It is important information for Council and the public [because of the views expressed] and, as I have stated, there are approvals in place to build the strip plaza. Let's see what the impact [is] versus what is allowed and what is being proposed.?

Added Councillor Rachel Gilliland: ?I am interested in the information [staff] will bring back to Council in regards to Councillor Thompson's request about that comparator. I do think that will be a really good piece of information to help us make the decision moving forward.?

But how much value that comparison will have was questioned by Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Speaking to the recommendation before Council to approve the development conditionally, he said Council's approval might be required before all the relevant environmental impact information needs to be filed by the Conservation Authority.

?There is no timeline for them to give it to us within our timeline, which is the 120 days,? he said. This is a problem we have consistently relayed to the Province?where to get that information in a timely manner so we can make those informed decisions. It is unfortunate that the system I feel, and I think many elected officials right across the Province, believe is broke, but if it continues the way it is, these are the types of applications that are going to come before us [to make decisions] without the full information that is required from third parties because they are allowed to give them to us after we've made our decisions. Hopefully we can make those changes, but we have what is in front of us and it is our obligation to make a decision.?

Council voted down the staff recommendation at the Committee level, opting to simply receive the report instead.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter