

L.A. Fitness plans take one step forward as new zoning is approved for development

By Brock Weir

Plans to transform the former site of the Reebok warehouse into an L.A. Fitness and plaza complex cleared a significant hurdle at Council last week.

Councillors approved zoning amendments to transform the land from industrial lands, to a commercial zone, effectively giving the go-ahead for the development. Four buildings are slated to be constructed on the nearly-seven acre site on Earl Stewart Drive adjacent to Bayview Avenue.

Although the zoning amendments were approved at Council, it was not a unanimous decision with some Councillors disagreeing on the best use of the site.

When the application for L.A. Fitness originally came forward last year, one of the primary Councillors to speak out about the plan was Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who argued the development wouldn't bring the number of 'quality' jobs that could be realised on the land. These were concerns she reiterated before the plans came up for final approval.

'I am not pleased we are changing industrial prestige to commercial because it is going to be a retail plaza and a large fitness centre,' she said. 'Neither of those provide permanent, full-time jobs and I believe that is what Aurora needs to bring into the Town.'

Councillor Evelyn Buck said she too opposed the plan, but for a different reason. The property, she said, has been vacant for a number of years, leading her to believe there was simply no desire left from interested parties to use the land for industrial purposes. Aurora has more than enough plazas, she concluded.

'I would rather have seen a proposal for a condo development in that area,' said Councillor Buck. 'We are greatly in need of that kind of accommodation here in Aurora and that, in my opinion, would be the perfect location for it. I am not against changing the use of this, but this particular change.'

The former Reebok site remained vacant for over a decade before its demolition earlier this year.

For Councillors voting in favour of the land change, the time was well overdue to get something new and productive on the land and there is a willing party to do so.

'I think we would assume the owners have made every effort to find a suitable buyer for it and, in this case, the buyer has come along and provided a use which will utilize the facility and will generate tax revenue for the community,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'While I think we would all like to see this, or see that, at the end of the day you have a willing proponent who owns the land and is willing to make the best use of it in what they feel is appropriate. It generates taxes for us and it is much better than it sitting vacant for another 10 years.'

That was the general consensus around the table.

According to Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, although the land in question was designated for industrial use, in the years since that designation was handed down the Bayview area north of Wellington Street has increasingly become a commercial core in Aurora.

Most of the land has been converted to commercial uses, bar a 'pocket' of land near St. John's Sideroad.

Citing vacant commercial properties on Bayview, such as the former home of Blockbuster Video, however, Councillor Buck said

she remained unconvinced that the commercial approach was the right one for this area.

?Undoubtedly, these [empty premises] will be occupied, but they are not earning us any great revenue sitting there empty,? she said
?The way I see it, we are approving something that is going to be more vacant stores, no jobs, no revenue, no life, no vitality.
Condos would provide something of that life into that neighbourhood. I don't think that whole west side of Bayview is necessarily improved by having nothing but commercial strips on it.

?My vision is people, residents, and people that will provide a market for the empty stores that are down there and allow business people to thrive.?