

Neighbours still at odds over Aurora United Church plans



By Brock Weir

Councillors last week said they hoped neighbours could come together to build a consensus over Aurora United Church's redevelopment plans before they render a final decision this summer ? but, as far as bridges go, there is still a wide gap to cover. Crowds filled Council chambers last Wednesday night for the final public planning meeting on the proposed redevelopment of Aurora United Church and its associated seven-storey, 152 unit Amica retirement home.

The assembled audience represented all views on the issue ? from neighbours worried the new retirement home building will set a terrible development precedent in their largely Victorian neighbourhood, neighbours who wanted to see some downtown revitalization, and, still, neighbours who just want a place of worship to once again call their own.

Nearly 20 residents came to the podium last week to make their appeals to Council. These appeals ranged from tweaks to ? our outright rejection of ? the rebuild plans, to just getting on with it, to considering the benefits to the larger community from both perspectives.

One such neighbour urging a significant re-think on the development plans was Tanya Pietrangelo, who said the developers simply had not done enough to change the plan to fit in with the area ? ?our charming community full of character.?

?Our homes will suffer if this development proceeds as is,? she said. ?My current house value will diminish. Who will pay for that difference? And I am not the only one. How would you feel if a large seven storey building was going to be built right beside your house or right in front of your front door? Or just a few doors down from the house you wanted to call home for the next 60 year and invested all of your savings in? I have spoken to so many of our neighbours on Tyler, Temperance, George, Mosley, Mill, etc., and they all share the same sentiments as I do.

?This has nothing to do with the church or the church plan itself. We support the church in its endeavours to rebuilt, but it is the proposed retirement building plan as is that is not good enough. It is obtrusive. It does not fit in and it doesn't add value to our residential community.?

More needs to be done to set back the building from Temperance and Tyler to be more in keeping with the existing homes and, ideally, should not be more than three-storeys high in keeping with what is already in the neighbourhood. She said she understood that it might not be feasible with the developer with whom the church is partnered, but said no more than five stories should be allowed.

?Over 200 of our neighbours signed a petition that voiced their concerns about the scale and size of the building and the issue of adequate parking and increased traffic. Please listen to your residents,? she said. ?How many neighbours that already feel so defeated? They feel that the Town doesn't care about them. How shameful when residents who pay their taxes and contribute to the community are made to feel this way. Listen to your residents and make the developer come back with a better plan that fits with our homes and our community.?

Among those in the opposite corner was Brian Elliott. Although a resident of Newmarket, Mr. Elliott said he has been a member of the Aurora United Church congregation for nearly three decades, drawn to the church because of the wide array of activities it

offered and community programs it facilitated, from Inn From The Cold to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Approving the plan would ensure the 'Angel of Yonge Street' rises once again in Aurora.

'While of course the building is gone, our spirit continues to thrive. We need help to help us create a new home,' he said. 'We want to make the church and its facility a centre for the community in addition to it being the church home. To do this, and ensure a legacy, we need funds to make this happen. Unfortunately, even with our insurance settlement, we needed help and we sought out a quality development partner for a joint proposal where we would retain the ownership of the land.

'Contemplate that if this proposal doesn't succeed, what happens? I take a very logical view of things. There seem to be two alternatives. One is to move to a much less costly building and a site, perhaps outside of Aurora's boundaries. There is not a lot of affordable land in Aurora. For us, this is not what we would want to happen. We are an urban church on Yonge Street and we would like to get back to our mission on Yonge Street. The second alternative is to merge with an existing church with existing facilities, possibly outside of Aurora's boundaries. Again, this is not what we want. The congregation is dedicated to Aurora.'

There were many additional reasons to go ahead with the plan, he offered. One was to replace a lost building and all the community resources it provides, thus taking pressure off municipal resources to fill the gaps, providing quality retirement spaces for a growing seniors' population, the employment opportunities that come along with it, and meeting intensification targets.