

Plans for new Aurora United Church set to take a step forward

By Brock Weir

In its 200th anniversary year, the next chapter of Aurora United Church congregation is set to flip a page forward this week. Council is set to ratify a newly amended site plan this week that includes designs for the rebuilt Aurora United Church (AUC) at its historic site at Yonge and Tyler Streets and an adjacent seven storey retirement residence that will be built in conjunction with the church.

While site developers will not likely be able to formally break ground on the rebuild until the fall as Official Plan appeals are still working their way through the system ahead of a hearing slated for this September, the site plan approval is a major hurdle towards the church's end goal.

The tentative site plan approval, which came at last week's General Committee meeting, came on the heels of a settlement reached between developers and neighbouring residents over plans for the retirement residence.

Neighbours, primarily on Temperance Street, just behind where the residence is slated to be built, objected not only to the massing of the building but also setbacks from the street, and took the matter to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB).

Before giving the green light at the Committee level, Council members said they were glad those details had been hammered out. "In the letter we received this afternoon from the appellants' lawyer, they mention they had been working with the applicant and they made some considerable progress with respect to resolving some of their concerns," said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, after Councillor John Abel said he was "pleased" to read the letter as residents' satisfaction is key.

"The official plan amendment was appealed by one of the residents and that is in front of the Tribunal. The applicant then appealed the zoning bylaw application, which is in front of the Tribunal as well. As Council is aware, prior to executing the site plan agreement and pulling permits, staff works with the applicant to tailor the zoning bylaw to the site plan. There is a Tribunal hearing scheduled for September, so I am sure the applicant, the appellant and staff will be involved as well to ensure the [documents] are finalized for the Tribunal issue."

With this hurdle out of the way, Council members expressed their satisfaction that momentum was now behind efforts to rebuild AUC after the nearly 150-year-old building was levelled by a disastrous fire in April 2014.

"It was horrifically sad that day, but I can see it just pulled our community together and made us closer," said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. "I am really looking forward to seeing this place of worship on the main focal point of Yonge Street, where it is going to serve many purposes, and I really look forward to the integrated support - a central place where people can go, central to our downtown core, and I want to say thank you to everyone."

Added Councillor Abel: "The re-establishment of the United Church is a significant benefit to our community and we count on the services and support they provide. I am very pleased to be in support of this motion put before us."

The new church, as presented, will be a modern twist on the classic church design, with a large amount of glass on the façade acting as a window into the sanctuary. The gothic twin towers, which were an iconic feature of the former church, will be echoed in the rebuild, and the rebuilt facility will feature a series of stained glass windows salvaged from the fire which once provided a focal point to passers-by on Yonge Street.

"Shortly before the fire, I was in the United Church to attend a memorial service for a friend of mine and the church looked so beautiful, they had done such a wonderful job, and then the fire happened," recalled Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "I am looking forward to having the United Church back in its position and looking beautiful - looking different, but beautiful once again."

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: "I think the Church is going to be back where it rightfully belongs in the heart of the Downtown and I think this is exciting times not only for the church, but for the Town itself, with the United Church being rebuilt...Library Square, and there's Niagara College coming. It is exciting times for Aurora."

Other Councillors shared this excitement, noting the benefits the rebuild plans will bring to the downtown core once brought to reality.

"I think we're all eager to see the Church rebuilt and reclaim its position in the downtown core," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "It is nice to see all the hard work is coming to fruition. I know that many have been involved in trying to address some of the causes and concerns that have gone on. Maybe they have lost a few hairs over it all, but it sounds like from my colleagues that for the first time this item has been before us it will be unanimously approved. I know the last time there were two Councillors who voted against this and it sounds like they have changed their mind, so I am glad to see it unanimous."