

Plaza plans approved, but continue to divide Council

By Brock Weir

Strip plazas dot the landscape in Aurora, but plans for an additional one at the foot of John West Way at Wellington Street East has left Councillors sharply divided.

The plan for a one-storey plaza on the northeast corner of the intersection has been the subject of many hours of debate at the Council table, but after the plan was approved by Council last week, some were left wondering why.

Voting against the plan were Councillors Chris Ballard, John Gallo, and Wendy Gaertner. The three Councillors have been consistent in their opposition to the plaza for a number of reasons, most significantly the fact it does not comply with Aurora's recently approved Promenade Plan, which governs the urban landscape on the Yonge and Wellington Corridors.

The plan in question conforms to neither the storey or configuration criteria. The property owners say that due to the size of and poor soil conditions on the lot it would be impossible to meet those goals. To compensate, they have created the façade of two storeys, but that plan was initially voted down by Council.

With the same plan coming back to Council for a second round, many Councillors reconsidered their previous stance.

"We are not completely masters of this house," said Councillor Evelyn Buck. "We are partners in how the municipality grows and develops. Our partner is the private sector and we can push as far as possible to see things evolve the way we would like them to evolve, but there comes a point where you have to stop pushing, where you have pushed as far as you can, and you have got as much as you've got."

Councillor Buck said she was never enthusiastic about the Promenade Plan in the first place as it covers properties which are not owned by the municipality. Property owners, such as the owners of the Wellington Street lot, have to get a return on what they have invested and this is the only way to do that, she said.

I am persuaded this is the best we can expect on the site."

Others, such as Councillors John Abel and Paul Pirri, said they saw the Promenade Study as more of a guideline than a hard and fast rulebook. Applying the rules here, at the very start of the Promenade in the east side, "doesn't really make much sense" according to Councillor Abel, when they have said it is not feasible.

"There is a bending point. We have to look at all these matters before we make a decision otherwise we lose the opportunity to have a development with tax assessment and we also endure the possibility and risk of going to an [Ontario Municipal Board] OMB hearing," he said. "We're losing possible money and we're also losing because we're going to have to go to an OMB hearing."

Councillor Pirri likened refusing the development to a "five year old throwing a hissy fit" because you can't "just say no." Providing a "bit of give" is the "responsible" thing to do, from an objective standpoint.

"I think the applicant has done a very good job in demonstrating that it isn't feasible to meet all of those criteria. It is incumbent on us to be mature and look at this from an objective point of view and ultimately look at this on its merits."

The others, however, were not as convinced and bristled at the idea the Promenade Study was merely a guideline. Councillor Ballard, for instance, said there would be challenges for every developer in meeting the demands of the Promenade, but that was par for the course.

"We have a planning guide for a reason and I am very concerned that the first kick at it we're ready to say, because you've brought it

back to us a number of times, we'll let it through the way it is," he said.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner expressed similar sentiments, adding that Aurora should not make decisions based on whether or not they are up to a challenge at the OMB.

"I am not afraid because we have asked for modifications based on sound planning principles that have been approved by the Region of York," she said. "I think [bringing jobs and bringing tax revenues to Aurora] is very important for our community, more important than being worried about a developer and going to the OMB."

There was nothing new in the other Councillors arguments to change his mind, concluded Councillor John Gallo. He said he has heard that his fellow Councillors have been "persuaded" but there was no new information put forward to base that on and said there would be an "outcry" of councillors changing their opinions "for no reason."

"I have heard things like the Promenade Study is a guideline when it is a policy," he said. "We should really get that one straight. I have no desire to support this. I think we could have done a better job. I think if we are unified on this as we were in the past from the beginning we probably would have got something very different."