

Proposal for former Canadian Tire site raises questions at Council, in community

A proposal to transform the southwest corner of Yonge Street and Murray Drive into a mixed-use residential and retail complex will be subject to a further Public Planning meeting after a lengthy session at Town Hall last week.

At issue is the first phase of the proposal on the site which is currently occupied by the former Canadian Tire store.

This phase is part of a wider vision which is proposed to overhaul the other three corners of Yonge and Murray in a multi-year window that is currently without a formal proposal or firm timeline.

More concrete plans for the first phase were the focus of debate at the February 14 meeting.

The proposal includes two seven-storey residential blocks with retail on the ground floor fronting Yonge Street. In behind, two five-storey blocks are proposed, separated by what's described as a "linear park," and townhouses are proposed for the western-most part of the property line.

If brought to completion as proposed last week, it will include 900 units and more than 2,400 square metres of retail space.

"We started with a holistic design, developing buildings that have the highest densities along Yonge Street, then taper down to three storeys abutting the existing townhomes on the west side," said Paula Bustard, on behalf of property owners Smart Centres REIT, referencing the nearby Mosaics neighbourhood off Murray. "We focused on creating the linear park, that is .7 acres that connects into the War Memorial."

Presenting the proposal, Bustard acknowledged the feedback the plan received from members of the public at an open house in January. Their concerns included issues related to density, traffic, parking, affordable housing, and the "adequate" replacement of existing retail space.

The present site, she says, includes 122,000 square feet of retail and they're proposing to replace it with 30,000 square feet of the same.

"I would urge you not to consider retail as being a one-for-one replacement," Bustard told Council. "The landscape has changed, the size of retail has changed, our ability to provide a robust mix of uses is not dictated solely on square footage. That being said, as part of our resubmission, we are looking at if we can increase that number higher than 30,000."

"Being good neighbours is a big part of this. We asked about tenure. This will be a mix of rental and condo. The division of that hasn't been determined at this point. It has been asked if we'd look into affordable options and we will work with York Region on looking into the possibility of affordable units. Right now, it is going to be a mix of rental and condo, but we haven't determined the percentage or mix at this stage."

In reviewing the proposal as it stands, many Council members agreed that the plans largely conform with the Aurora Promenade Plan, which was approved by Council in the early 2010s to guide development and intensification on the Yonge Street corridor from the railway bridge in the south to St. Andrew's Village in the north. But lawmakers shared many of the concerns raised at the January meeting and by residents during the public portion of the Valentine's Day session.

"While I agree that we have always identified the southern area of the Promenade as an area for intensification, and it has been part of our Official Plans and Promenade Plans, I do have concerns with regards to the proposal in front of us," said Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, stating he would like to see more information on on-site parking as well as traffic impacts the proposal might have on Yonge and Murray. "I think it is important for us to make sure this is a well-thought-out plan, it doesn't create further issues in terms of congestion and complications down there."

"Looking at the report, there seems to be a number of studies outstanding that need to be brought forward and addressed, studies that speak to vibration, sound mitigation? [and] I think some of these things need to be addressed and brought forward at the next Public Planning meeting?. It's got to be well-thought-out, otherwise we're going to make a nightmare out of the southern end of Yonge Street."

Councillor Thompson also said he wanted to see further retail along the Yonge Street frontage, a view shared by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said it was important to make way for "medium-sized" retail as opposed to "cubby holes for salons and nail places."

"I'm not knocking them, they're all great, but giving a bigger space so Healthy Planet, or maybe a smaller version of Healthy Planet could go in there, or a decent-sized café. I just want to make sure the intent is there with the opportunity for a variety of target-market businesses could choose to be there," she said.

Similarly, Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo said the bulk of the retail will happen in Phase Two of the plan and there's nothing "committing" the builders to bringing Phase Two to fruition, "at least the way it is designed now."

"I've seen too many times when we've been given these types of things, a lot of excuses come up " market changes " and things don't get developed as we see them before us."

For Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, it was a matter of design. If the design was right, it "could win a lot of people over," he said.

"SmartCentres have been great corporate partners in the past and in other sections of Town and I hope we will continue the dialogue into the next planning session."

Near the end of the discussion, Mayor Tom Mrakas stated his views, underscoring the need for housing in Aurora and that the area in question here has been primed for residential housing growth.

"Nothing is planned in a vacuum. It is all part of an integrated approach that is future-focused while meeting the planning needs of today," he said, stating that work still needed to be done on density and that Council members should voice what they feel is an appropriate level of retail. "The application conforms directly with our OP (Official Plan) as outlined in our secondary plan, the Promenade Plan. It is our plan. Our vision for Aurora.

"The proposal conforms directly with the Town's Official Plan and sections 11.6 and 11.7 by promoting the transformation of a primarily automobile-oriented commercial retail plaza into a vibrant, pedestrian-oriented mixed-use area. Further, the design features a high-quality built form in line with the Aurora Promenade Urban design strategy and in particular the overarching vision of transforming from commercial strip to mixed use promenades, and strengthens the entryway function from south Yonge Street."

But, Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who represents Ward 3 in which the proposal lies, was of a different viewpoint, adding that while she was pleased the builders are proposing an environmentally-friendly white roof for the building, the density needed to change, the green space needed to be expanded, and more needed to be done to ensure it was a "complete community."

"We need to show that we care about the community, and we do," she said. "What we do here is going to be a precedent for the other three corners and all the way up Yonge Street, north to St. Andrew's mall. We have to be very careful and very smart and creative about this plan."

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