

Proposed development near Yonge and Wellington spurs Council contention



By Brock Weir

It has stood empty for decades, but a vacant lot just south of the southeast corner of Yonge and Wellington could soon be filled in with a four storey apartment building and retail space.

Boasting 12 apartment units and retail on the ground level next door to the historic Aurora Post Office/Clock Tower building, the development was given tentative approval at the Committee level by Councillors last week, but Councillors were divided on whether this would be a help or a hindrance to Aurora's Downtown Core.

The plans call for the first three storeys of the building to be built directly in line with the Old Town Hall to the north of the site, and sticking out just past the north side of the post office building. The upper two stories are set back from the road and include patios and balconies.

Council was asked to give the green light to the building at General Committee last week and after clearing the hurdle, it comes forward next week for formal approval by Council.

‘I think this is exactly the kind of development Downtown Aurora needs,’ said Councillor Paul Pirri. ‘We have a vacant property that is collecting next to no taxes and we would be infilling, which is what we’re supposed to be doing from the Provincial standpoint. If you are looking to get people shopping in the downtown core, one of the easiest ways to do that is have them living in the downtown core.’

Councillor Pirri’s enthusiasm was shared by Councillor Evelyn Buck, who said the proposed building was beautiful and in keeping with the surrounding architecture in the area ‘and it is a far side better than the ‘rotting old shack’ which stood there decades ago,’ she said.

‘The only way this block was going to see renewal was if we brought people back into the block and we have been doing that slowly, but steadily,’ said Councillor Buck. ‘I say ‘we’, but we have had very little to do with it. It has been private investment. We are seeing renovation and renewal in our downtown and it is not costing us a penny.’

‘It has nothing to do with patterned concrete sidewalks or trees planted in the concrete or sidewalk cafes,’ she added referring to design concepts as part of the Aurora Promenade plan. ‘It has to do with somebody willing to risk his providence, our partners in the development of Aurora. We have always known if we’re going to have this renewal, we were going to have to make compromises.’

For some Councillors however, they wondered if this compromise was too much. Councillors Chris Ballard and Michael Thomson,

for instance, said they were concerned this plan was coming to Council before it went to a Public Planning meeting for neighbours to have a say on the plan, as well as bypassing the Committee of Adjustment, at least for the moment, on a request to reduce the 26 parking spots normally required for a development like this to just 12.

According to Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, however, there was no need for a public notice because it is just a site plan application, it complies with zoning, and the land use is not changing. The parking issue, he added, would comply with new standards outlined in the Aurora Promenade Plan.

‘We tried to incentivise redevelopment in this part of the Downtown Area and one of the challenges is our current zoning bylaw parking rate,’ said Mr. Ramunno, noting neighbouring property owners had been informed of the plan. ‘Our official plan has lowered the parking rate so the shortfall is really two spaces.’

Councillor Ballard, however, was not satisfied.

‘I think that when the businesses that utilize that very limited parking [already there] become aware of this proposal all hell is going to break loose,’ he said. ‘The parking has been a tinder keg from day one. Until that is sorted out, I will have great difficulty supporting a concept that wants to move from 26 to 12 parking spaces. This is something I really wish came before a meeting where adjacent owners could have come and spoken and we would be able to discuss [our concerns] with the owner.’

Added Councillor Thompson: ‘I don't want to solve one problem and add to another. We always hear from the downtown merchants the issue of parking over and over. I think it is important for us just to feel comfortable with what is being proposed and that it will not impact downtown merchants.’