

## Reebok comes down for L.A. Fitness, but questions remain on Aurora retail

**By Brock Weir**

Construction workers over December made fast work of the former Reebok warehouse on Bayview Avenue.

After sitting idle and empty off and on for the past decade, little more than rubble remains of the building as the property makes way for a new L.A. Fitness, along with new office and retail space next year. At December's Public Planning meeting, Councillors were pleased that something productive was to be done with the languishing property, but there was some disagreement on what this use should be.

Now that the building has been largely demolished, developers plan to turn the nearly seven hectare site into four commercial buildings. The anchor of the development will be a large-scale L.A. Fitness gym of nearly 46,000 square feet, along with a 4,000 square foot bank, two 13,500 square foot commercial buildings and a parking lot to connect them all.

Although there are still some further details to sort finalize, such as driveway access from Bayview Avenue which would have to be cleared from the Regional Level, some Councillors were not happy that so much of the site would be dedicated to retail use.

"We have been pretty fastidious about employment lands and not allowing them to be changed to any other use and here we have a proposal to change six acres to commercial," said Councillor Evelyn Buck.

Part of the problem, she said, was a perceived lack of business being done in other retail centres throughout Aurora. This includes SmartCentres at Wellington Street and Highway 404 which has experienced turnover in their retail outlets, particularly the closure of their Rona store.

"There is not yet enough commercial traffic going in there and that is a problem for us," she continued. "I realise the building has been vacant for a long time and if there isn't a market for what was before then we have to contemplate a different use."

Councillor Wendy Gaertner was also on the same page, having earlier this term questioned whether Aurora had too many retail spaces compared to professional office spaces.

"To have a single tenant building as a fitness centre, it is a business but it does not employ many people," she said. "I am really hoping we can bring in [better] paying full-time jobs that pay benefits. Retail brings with it part-time, low-paying seasonal jobs and the Region doesn't look at retail really as the kind of employment it wants to bring into employment lands."

"We need the kinds of jobs where people don't have to commute, don't have to go far afield. We want them to live and work in Aurora and I think we have all heard that at election time. We have enough retail jobs, [but] we do not have enough full time jobs with benefits and I do not think this development that is over 76,000 square feet of retail is what this community needs."

Ultimately, only Councillors Buck and Gaertner were the two holdouts in voting against the plan. Speaking in its favour, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said he would like to see "prestige office space" in this location, but that is not always possible; and in 10 years nobody has come forward to turn the property into just that.

"We have someone who has come forward and is willing to make the investment to put in millions of dollars in construction and no one else has stepped up to say they want to make that an office building," said Mayor Dawe. "It does make sense to me as a commercial place. I have been against commercial in other places I think it doesn't make sense. I think it does make sense here."

A similar viewpoint was shared by Councillor Chris Ballard who said the creeping in of residential neighbourhoods into this area has changed the face of what makes sense in this area of employment lands.

“This faces Bayview and it is a very valuable property from a retail perspective and from a visibility perspective,” he said. “Professional buildings may be a good thing, but I don’t see many of them fronting Bayview. It is about time for that old building to go and something new to be put there.”

Following Councillor Gaertner's comments, Councillor Michael Thompson said he “felt the need to defend retail.” They are not just owned by companies, but also individuals and small business owners who live in the community, he said.

“They are individuals who employ people in this community, individuals who sponsor and give back to the community and I know a number of people who live in those 2B lands and live north of there who work in those retail shops that line Bayview,” he said. “It suits Bayview. Bayview is a commercial street. I know some people like to pick on retail and say they are not great jobs but we know the growth and we know there is a demand for retail. Retail will continue to thrive and prosper and we will continue to see retail applications in front of us.”