

Rental apartments proposed for John West Way and Wellington

By Brock Weir

A rental apartment building of more than 130 units has been proposed for the northeast corner of John West Way and Wellington Street East, but the plans have left some neighbours seeing red.

Plans for the six-storey apartment building were presented at a recent Public Planning meeting.

There, proponents behind the project were seeking amendments to area zoning which are presently designated as commercial lands. A zoning bylaw amendment would pave the way for a residential build.

The land in question has been the subject of considerable speculation. Originally zoned for commercial use in the 1990s, several plaza proposals for the site have come and gone, some rejected by Council as they did not fit in with the vision of the Aurora Promenade Plan.

This is a different vision altogether for the corner and one planners say could act as a 'gateway' to Downtown Aurora.

If completed to the vision of planners, the building would consist of 134 units spread over six storeys with 175 surface and underground parking spots. Town bylaws currently only permit five-storey builds in this area, but developers are hoping to get an extra floor approved through the bonusing process, where the Town would make certain allowances in exchange for parts of the project benefiting the whole community.

In this case, that community benefit would be nearby trail enhancements, according to planners.

'This is the beginning of the process,' said Katherine Bibby, Planner for the Town of Aurora. 'We're looking at the one-storey bonusing provision and we're reviewing the potential for community benefits. Currently, there are trail enhancements proposed to provide that community benefit.'

'Public comments [on the proposals] have been received since the notice was placed in the papers. The comments are primarily related to environmental matters due to the floodplain, trees, wildlife, and the Aurora Community Arboretum, which is in proximity to the site. There are concerns about traffic on John West Way. There have been enquiries on whether affordable units will be available for seniors, or whether it will be rental or condominium.'

Indeed, these topics were very much the subjects of conversation by the time the proposal hit the Council table at June's Public Planning meeting.

While some residents said they welcomed more rental housing opportunities coming to Aurora, particularly for downsizing seniors, others were concerned about traffic in and out of the building having a negative impact on what is already a very busy vehicle corridor currently the subject of a traffic calming study.

The entrance to this proposed building is opposite the Tim Hortons entranceway, said John West Way resident Keith Ingle. This is one of the busiest intersections in Town and this proposal would mean a severe increase to the traffic in the area, and it is already dangerous going in and out of there. I think if this does get passed, the entranceway has to be somewhere else other than where it is. That is too heavy a traffic burden on the area.

These worries were shared by Mark Wyatt, a resident of Amberhill Way, a street immediately east of Town Hall, which is being reviewed for a future three-way stop.

The traffic is pretty crazy trying to get off Amberhil onto John West Way, he said. Every once in a while, we do hear some horrendous accidents [at the corner of] John West Way and Wellington.

Another Amberhill resident described the proposal as trying to fit an elephant into a bathtub.

Residents' concerns were noted by Council members and Town Staff at the meeting.

Responding to some of the questions, Town Planner David Waters addressed the issue of the proposed building's driveway facing the entrance to the plaza across the street.

The best place to locate that intersection is opposite another intersection, said Mr. Waters. In terms of the traffic on Amberhil, Council has directed us to review the traffic flow at the moment and determine the best way to control it, whether it is through stop signs or through a crosswalk or a light. We're going to have a look at that and report back.

On the side of lawmakers, Councillors Sandra Humfryes and Wendy Gaertner said they shared residents' traffic concerns, but Council voted to accept the application in order for it to move to a future General Committee meeting for a more formal Council debate.

While concerned residents will have to wait for a date to be set, Mayor Tom Mrakas made his feelings clear.

'We're going to move it forward to a GC, but it doesn't mean we're making any decisions tonight,' he said. 'I think there are some concerns, major concerns. We have all tried to get some coffee at that Tim Hortons there and we all know how hard it is to get out and how crazy traffic can be in that area.'

Mayor Mrakas added that in his years sitting at the table, both as Mayor and Councillor, that he has never seen a traffic report hit the table that raised alarm bells, and that is concerning.

Also of concern, he noted, was the planners' intent to apply for an extra storey beyond what is currently allowed in zoning provisions.

'I am looking through this application and I don't necessarily see that benefit to warrant giving a bonusing provision for that additional height,' he said. 'Frankly, without that community benefit, I would be absolutely against a six-storey building at that corner. I would be willing to have that conversation on a five-storey building, but at six storeys I'm against it.'

'When we get all that information and come back to [General Committee] is when we can make a decision, whether it is the right thing for the community or not, whether it is being overdeveloped, whether it is appropriate. Let's give the opportunity for the applicant to work with staff, work with residents, try to alleviate some of those concerns and if those concerns aren't met, for me, if this proposal comes back and it looks exactly the way it is, my vote would be a no at that time.'