

Retail still at issue for proposed condo at Yonge and Irwin

Revised plans for a potential six-storey condo on the southwest corner of Yonge Street and Irwin Avenue still falls short in the Town's vision of the Aurora Promenade, according to Councillor John Gallo.

Councillor Gallo reiterated his position on the proposed development at last week's Public Planning meeting.

Meeting on December 7, Council received a presentation from developers on modifications that have been made to the proposal of the now-136-unit plan, and while one issue voiced earlier this fall was finally addressed at the table, a solution might not be found any time soon.

“The corner unit at the Yonge Street and Irwin Avenue intersection will be designed to fully accommodate commercial uses, in compliance with accessibility requirements in the Ontario Building Code,” said municipal planners in a report to Council. “Other units fronting Yonge Street could become live-work or expanded home occupations without modifications.”

But that was not enough from the perspective of Councillor Gallo.

“My biggest issue is removing the ground-floor commercial,” he said, referencing the Promenade Plan. “A mixture of uses is encouraged to provide high activity to animate the streetscape, such as retail and restaurants at grade with residential uses on the second floors.”

He dismissed the views offered by the proponents that retail would not be supported on this particular stretch of Yonge Street as something that “couldn't be farther from the truth.”

“You only have to look across the street at the other condominium (Centro) which has retail on the ground floor – retail from Yonge and Wellington up,” he continued. “There's commercial uses north of the church (Our Lady of Grace), south of the church, on the west side, not that far is an entire plaza. That really doesn't make any sense to me, not to mention the fact that it is simply not true.”

“There is so much time spent on the Official Plan, and specifically in greater detail, the Promenade. One of the largest things that, to me, the work that was put into that is to create a dynamic streetscape and pedestrian experience. Removing the ground floor retail commercial space from that, to me, does not follow those plans. Not only doesn't it follow those plans, this building, I'm sure, will be here for 100 years and if we're thinking in the short-term, like right now, it might be a little difficult to rent those spaces [but] it is not a forever problem. The Promenade and the Official Plan thinks farther than a few years.”

The issue, he said, is the ability for developers to rent those spaces.

It is “far easier to sell a condo,” he contended, compared to a retail space.

“I get that and if I was in their shoes, it is probably what I would do,” he concluded. “We are not in their shoes. It is our job to look after the best interests of the Town and removing that ground floor retail is not doing the downtown core any justice. I think it is a huge mistake.”

Proponents of the plan, however, defended their position on retail.

Consultant Naama Blonder said in order for retail to be successful on that stretch of Yonge “and in similar areas” it needs to be contiguous.

“In the nicest European cities you can think of, retail ends at some intersection and then just doesn't continue,” said Blonder. “The other thing we saw before COVID and especially after COVID is abandoned storefronts. If we're speaking about the pedestrian

experience, it is really making it worse to see abandoned storefronts. It is very sad pedestrian experience? and I am saying it as a pedestrian.

?Retail will simply set it to fail on this specific site. South of Wellington, I agree, is a whole other creature. On the north side of Wellington, we are setting something to fail.?

The issue of retail, however, was not the only concern voiced by Council. Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, sought assurances from the developers that the proposed building would be set back far enough from Yonge Street to allow for wide, pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, another principle in the Promenade Plan.

Councillor Rachel Gilliland noted that more work needed to be done to ensure residents in the already-established areas of Irwin Avenue and Machel Avenue, which would abut the proposed building on the west side, would not be adversely impacted by increased traffic.

But, for Mayor Tom Mrakas, it was important for the planning process to continue with these issues addressed at the next step.

?We need to continue through the process and provide those opportunities to work on these things,? he said. ?If we keep going [back to Public Planning meetings], this is a reason the Province doesn't want to give autonomy to municipalities to allow them to have a final say in municipal decisions, land use planning decisions, because they stated many times we take too long to make a decision. Yes, we want to make the best decision, the most informed decision, but when we have the information in front of us, we need to make a decision? to keep going back to Public Planning, that sends a message to the Province that we're not grown up enough to continue through the process that has been developed for municipalities to make that decision for our community. We constantly talk about how we want to have this in our hands to be able to make that decision. Well, we need to step up to the plate and make those decisions.

?We're not approving anything tonight, but we're moving through the process. When it comes back in front of us, if we like it and we think it is going to work in our community, as a Council we will say, ?Let's move forward with this because it is in the best interests of our community and the downtown core.' If we don't like anything that is being presented to us, we need to step up to the plate and say ?why'? from a planning perspective we're saying no.?

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