

Seniors Care addition could prompt change to public planning process

By Brock Weir

A four-storey addition onto a seniors' care facility in an established southwest neighbourhood could prompt a change in how residents will be informed about applications on nearby properties.

Council approved a motion last week calling on planning staff to develop a policy requiring full notification for site plan applications and public planning applications.

The motion was proposed by Councillor Wendy Gaertner in response to a number of residents in the Murray Drive and Seaton Drive neighbourhoods angered about not being notified of significant additions planned for the area long-term care facility, formerly known as Kingsway Arms.

Once complete according to the proposal, the present two-storey facility will loom four-storeys over present homes, the owners of which were not formally notified these changes were working their way through Town Hall.

Formal notification is simply a matter of 'respect,' said Councillor Gaertner.

'We saw recently where a site plan was proposed for a neighbourhood, the application would come to Council for a General Committee meeting and a Council meeting, the residents wouldn't have known about it, they wouldn't have been able to give us their input, and that's what we're here for: to know what our residents are thinking about, whatever is going on in the Town,' she said.

'But, in this case it was in their particular neighbourhood. I think that it would be respectful that if any kind of development was going on in the neighbourhood that we do the notification, that we do the posting on the particular piece of land or building, just as we do for our public planning meeting applications. That's it. I just think we need to have as much input from our residents as we can, so out of respect we should provide notification.'

Speaking in favour of the motion, Councillor Michael Thompson said the recent concerns brought forward by the residents show there is indeed a 'gap' that has to be addressed. While municipalities may not be required to notify residents of these applications, they should.

'I think we need to go above and beyond to keep our residents informed, especially when it is something that can dramatically impact the neighbourhood,' he said.

In response, Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, said he didn't have a problem with requiring applicants to post a sign on their properties to notify residents they have submitted a site plan application, but a further report would have to come to Council.

'[Posting] at the very minimum will advise neighbours that they have submitted an application and they could then call the planning department to find out further about what is being proposed,' said Mr. Ramunno of the potential changes.

Councillor Thompson said he looked forward to a draft policy coming up for their review, but said notification should go beyond just tacking up a sign for the neighbours to find.

'I wouldn't be opposed to looking at the same processes we do with other planning development applications and actually notifying the residents ourselves,' said Councillor Thompson. 'I know there is a cost implication to it, but we can have that discussion when the draft policy comes out. Too often, I have heard residents come in and say, 'I wasn't aware, I didn't see the sign' and we have struggled with this time and time again. It is about making sure residents have the information they need.'

Cautious in his support for the motion was Councillor Paul Pirri, who said he was concerned the motion might be seen as a 'knee-jerk' reaction.

'I don't want to call this a knee-jerk reaction from discussions we had over the last meeting with the last development because I do think there is a prolonged history of this,' he said. 'It doesn't come out of one single application, but I don't think this is the right time to be having the discussion around what the pros and cons are.'

'We're asking for a policy to come back to us. I want to make doubly sure that that policy will have a report outlining things like how many site plan applications we are already approving. Are there any benefits [for it coming] straight to Council [and] that we're not causing problems for ourselves down the road.'