

Six storey apartment complex proposed for Wellington and John West Way



Previously proposed as a location for a one-storey plaza, the northeast corner of John West Way is now being considered for a six-storey apartment complex.

Sitting at the Committee level last week, Council considered a request for a zoning bylaw amendment which would have the way for the 150-unit complex. The request also included potential 'community improvements' proposed by the developer in bonusing to achieve that extra floor in an area zoned for just five storey developments.

'In 2013, an Official Plan (OP) amendment and Zoning Bylaw Amendment was approved by Town Council for a one-storey multi-unit retail plaza on subject lands,' said Town Planner Rosana Punit in a report to Council. 'The OP Amendment changed the designation from 'Promenade General' to 'Promenade General Special' and exempted the subject lands from 'Official Commercial' to 'Shopping Centre Commercial.' Site plan approval was not secured by the previous owner.'

The zoning amendment application calls for the lands to be re-zoned from 'Community Commercial Exception' and 'Environmental Protection Zone' to 'Second Density Apartment Residential Exception Zone' and 'Environmental Protection Zone' but by the time the application hit the Council table last week, objections were raised on the grounds of both the environment and its lack of retail space within the Aurora Promenade.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner led the way with concerns over the impact this build might have on the local environment. It would be built adjacent to local trails and a stream. Similar issues were raised by Councillor Rachel Gilliland who voiced concerns over the amount of paving that would be on site, although she praised environmental features in the plan that would reduce the building's potential role as a 'heat island.'

But much of the debate centred on the lack of ground floor retail. The issue was raised by Councillor John Gallo who voiced similar objections to a proposed residential complex at the southwest corner of Yonge Street and Irwin Avenue.

Both land parcels are within the Aurora Promenade Plan which calls for ground floor retail wherever possible within the Promenade areas of Yonge and Wellington.

'We did take a look [at ground floor retail] but this site was hard in terms of providing the required parking that would be necessary for retail,' said consultant Joanna Fast, responding to Councillor Gallo. 'We're not able to go underground [for parking]. We do have to do specific ground improvements to make this design work, so that is the reason why we haven't done any ground floor retail. Through our application, we did do a commercial needs study and there is a lot of retail and commercial development in the area. It was concluded it wasn't necessary on this site.'

Councillor Gallo, however, stuck to the Aurora Promenade Plan and questioned why the recommendations before Council didn't reflect the retail provisions contained in the Plan.

'How come in this report it doesn't speak to what our Official Plan says regarding having ground floor retail?' he asked, stating that on Page 4 of last week's report, retail is noted as being 'provided within the vicinity.'

'It is interesting the last report we got in 2018, those last three words, 'within the vicinity' were not there. There is a difference when you say 'will be provided within the vicinity.' If it stops at 'provided,' it means it has to be provided in that building. That is the wording in the Official Plan.

'For some reason we added 'within the vicinity' which changes the whole feeling of that sentence. Not to mention, nowhere in this report, unlike Yonge Street properties, does it say it doesn't comply. When we had the report on our last Public Planning meeting for the Yonge Street properties, it said that the Official Plan Promenade Study Secondary Plan specifically says, 'to have ground floor retail.' That developer was choosing between having it or not.'

Given these questions, and to give the members of the public, particularly nearby neighbours, a chance to weigh in on the proposal, the matter was deferred to a future Council meeting.

'It has been two-and-a-half years since we had this at Public Planning,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'I would like to hear from staff on what efforts were made this time around to notify residents in the area that this application was back in front of us. Perhaps new residents wouldn't know about it at all. We owe it to them to notify them that this is in front of us to ensure they have the opportunity to provide additional comments.'

Added Councillor Gilliland, noting the recent retirement of Director of Planning David Waters: 'I would support the deferral. There are a lot of unanswered questions and considering we don't have our Director to get those answers [before the next Council meeting].'

For Councillor Gaertner, it was appropriate for the proposal to come before another Public Planning meeting to discuss the environmental matters, but Mayor Tom Mrakas disagreed, stating: 'It is our obligation to get all the information we need to make an informed decision. To go back to Public Planning, you might as well just say to the developer, 'Go to the (Local Planning Appeals) Tribunal. We might as well just say 'no' now.'

Proposed community improvements for the extra story include improvements along the adjacent Tim Jones Trail and upgrades to historic Petch House, located behind the Aurora Seniors' Centre.

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter