

St. John's West development draws questions from nearby residents

A proposal to transform a large swath of St. John's Sideroad into homes and a mid-rise eight-storey apartment building drew challenges last week from nearby residents.

Council considered the proposal at last week's Public Planning meeting, a session which brought out nearly a dozen nearby residents voicing their concerns to Council through Zoom.

Among their concerns were the influx of traffic onto St. John's Sideroad from the development of both the multi-unit building as well as 88 single family homes, the impact clearing the land will have on the environment, and its compatibility with the surrounding neighbourhoods.

"There is no way for us to cross currently at St. John's safely or even bike or walk safely down St. John's," said resident Marie Loure. "Those things were very big concerns back in Phase 1 and they still hold true right now?. This is going to make a worse situation for us."

Traffic on St. John's is already a challenge, agreed resident Gordon Logan, who said people are going to drive through the development and onto St. John's to get to Bathurst and onto Highway 400.

"My concern is not development," he said. "I am not objecting to development. I am objecting to the type of development."

Dzintra Schlotter, a resident of the St. Andrew's-on-the-Hill, was also concerned about the traffic impacts, stating that St. John's was already functioning "at capacity" during morning and afternoon peak times.

"When is the Town going to provide a safe way for the current residents and pedestrians to get to the area, because the problem will only be magnified when the development is in progress," she said.

Her concerns, however, were dominated by the environmental impacts, a common thread amongst the neighbours.

"The proposed site of the development was originally designated Oak Ridges Moraine "Rural," she said. "Development to the south [comprises of] approximately 400 homes on a much larger area of land [that] was done in a low-density residential plan with extensive nature trails throughout the entire subdivisions, leaving abundant naturally-forested areas for wildlife to survive. Why is a proposal of a similar nature not applied to [here]?"

This was echoed by Ms. Loure who criticized the planned "destruction" of forests and "disruption" of wildlife.

"It is destroying ourselves by destroying the natural habitat," she said.

Similarly, Wellington Lanes resident Maricella Saucedo questioned how the destruction of more than 1,500 trees in this phase of the development alone dovetails with the Town's declaration of a Climate Emergency.

"Has anyone calculated how much stored carbon has already been released and how much more will be released should this application be approved?" she asked. "While I understand there will be a restoration plan and monetary compensation, this will not compensate for the immediate loss of mature trees and the essential services they provide the community. Simply put, when we cut down a 50-year-old tree and replace it with a sapling, it takes many years for the sapling to provide [the same] services, assuming it survives.

"While I understand housing is important, so too is our natural environment. In my opinion, we need to find a better balance because from what I am seeing on St. John's Sideroad, this balance has already been lost."

These environmental concerns were underscored by Wendy Kenyon and George Skoulikas of the Henderson Forest Ratepayers Association.

According to Ms. Kenyon, the most 'concerning' part of the application for her was the impact on habitat for species that are endangered, threatened or of special concern.

'This is important because when habitat shrinks, species become crowded in overloaded ecosystems,' she said. 'They have to compete for fewer resources. The predator-prey relationship changes and disease becomes more prevalent. The loss of biodiversity certainly isn't a good thing for wildlife, but also for humans who have to live with the inevitable fallout.'

Added Mr. Skoulikas: 'This represents death by a thousand cuts.'

And what are the cuts making way for? The multi-rise building was identified in particular by the delegates.

'This development is going to put a huge stress [on] this area and we will suffer an irrecoverable loss of wildlife by this development if we don't do it carefully,' said Shawn Xiong.

'We're chopping trees down so we can put up high-rises,' added Pierre Geoffroy. 'It is appalling for people like myself, my family and others who moved here years ago because they liked the green spaces, they liked to drive and see horses. We used to see deer across the street from where I live. Many coyotes have gone by, families of wild turkeys would be seen on a regular basis - this is all gone right now. The last little bit of green space that we have is basically where Shining Hill is planning to cut more trees and put up some cement, some more concrete, some more pavement. Please, Council, consider this very, very carefully. It is basically all that we have left and really, as Council members, you are the stewards.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter