

Townhouse complex approved amid concerns for downtown retail

By Brock Weir

A development of 126 stacked back-to-back townhouses spread between six four-storey blocks has been approved for Aurora's Downtown Core, despite some worries of the impacts it might have on local traffic and retail.

The development is slated for land on the northwest corner of Yonge and Wellington, just north of Dollarama, which was formerly the site of a grocery store, and directly across the street of a large condominium complex which is inching towards completion.

Residents came forward at last week's Council meeting to offer their worries on the impact this development might have on area traffic but while Council received traffic studies saying it should not have a negative hit on the already busy corridor, lawmakers' attention turned to how it might help or hinder getting people into the Downtown Core.

The original proposal for this site called for a mixed use condo complex which would have incorporated retail and commercial uses on the bottom floor with condos and apartments on the storeys above. The final plan, however, is significantly different with no retail and the units divided into multiple blocks.

Requiring retail at ground level is a key plank in the Town's Promenade Plan, which covers swaths of Yonge Street and Wellington Street, and this deviation raised the eyebrows of Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

"I understand the developer has concerns that providing commercial and retail at grade won't be viable, but that is the old reality," she contended. "Right now we have condos at Centre and Yonge, we have a large townhouse development going in on Tyler and, of course, whatever goes onto this property. I think it is the job of the developer [to build] what they think is best for their company and easiest to sell. I think it is our job to follow our planning policies and promote the communities we want."

While other Councillors said they too supported the vision of the Aurora Promenade, this situation provides a number of challenges, including the current commercial vacancies already found along the Yonge Street corridor.

"While I respect Councillor Gaertner's perspective, I am concerned because we see so many [retail spaces] in existing buildings that are not doing well, not thriving and empty, and it concerns me," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "I am now seeing evidence in our community of failed commercial first level units and I don't want to see any more of that."

This was a view shared by many around the table, including Councillor Paul Pirri, who said the Promenade Plan doesn't mean every single property proposed for the area has to have "something for people to do. It is okay to have some properties where people just live."

"We would have loved to have seen some commercial uses on the property but over the three previous meetings it was demonstrated through facts that if you want to build a sustainable downtown, you have to bring more people into the Downtown Core. Councillor Humfries is 100 per cent correct: there are a lot of these businesses that are suffering right now because there is nobody [patronizing] those facilities, so the more people you bring into the community, I think the better the opportunity we have to really foster the business community in Town."

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: "I am more concerned about getting people to open those store fronts on Yonge Street that are currently empty than adding more to the inventory, so to speak. The only way we are going to fill those shops is to get more people into the Downtown. We have other initiatives we are looking at, but at the heart of it, it is about having more people in the area to support those shops."

In the end, the proposal was approved 8 ? 1, with only Councillor Gaertner voting against the plan.

?We have to be mindful of the businesses in the area,? concluded Mayor Geoff Dawe. ?We don't want to be responsible for cannibalizing some of those businesses. I think we need to achieve a bit of balance there. We have to look at getting people downtown first.?