

Yonge Street apartment approved amid traffic, retail issues

Council has approved zoning bylaw amendments which will pave the way for an apartment complex at the southwest corner of Yonge and Irwin Avenues ? but, in doing so, a Councillor opposed to aspects of the project questioned whether his colleagues were ?afraid? of developers.

The question was raised by Councillor John Gallo at last week's Council meeting where lawmakers approved amendments to the Town's Official Plan, allowing a six-storey building along Yonge Street ? and eight storeys at the rear of the building ? with bonusing to allow for heights above and beyond what is currently allowed in the OP.

Bonusing allows for some flexibility on height and other components of the build if there are trade-off benefits for the community at large, such as public spaces.

Through this lens, Councillor Gallo said the plan does not go far enough, nor does it allow for ground floor retail as prescribed in the Town's plan for the Aurora Promenade.

Developers filed a report with the Town in April of 2021 stating there isn't a business case for ground floor retail, citing seven vacant retail spaces within a short distance of the property.

?As of today, only one of those seven [are] empty,? said Councillor Gallo. ?All the rest of them have small businesses in them. To me, that says one of two things: either what they're saying is incorrect, that?we're getting over a pandemic and there is the ability to rent those units, and they are also saying that adding more ground floor retail will add additional competition for, in their view, limited businesses that would want to move downtown.

?I don't subscribe to that. I don't have an issue with amending the Official Plan if there is community benefit and we have all said this across the table that we work very hard to maintain our official planning documents because they are important to us. In this case, the only benefit in amending the Official Plan is to the developer; there is no benefit to the Town in removing that ground floor retail, which is a big part of our upper downtown.?

Planners stating that some ground floor units would be convertible to retail, without much of the necessary infrastructure planned to be put in place, is a ?red herring,? he added.

Councillor Rachel Gilliland offered a similar view, stating it ?did not sound like an easy conversion,? but she was not in support of Councillor Gallo's motion to refer the matter back to staff.

?I am in support of the extra housing,? she said. ?As much as I want to defer this, I am not sure how much that is going to change the mind of the developer at this point. I am okay with the design as it is now and will vote against the referral.?

Councillor Michael Thompson was of a like viewpoint with regards to the potential of changing developers' minds.

?Enough conversations have happened around retail that if the applicant wanted to do it they would do it,? he said. ?I don't see the referral changing and I think we're back in the same spot, except we run the risk of it just being pushed to the [Ontario Land Tribunal (OLT) for appeal]. At the end of the day, we're long overdue to make a decision. If you agree that retail must be there, vote no. If you can live with the application as is, vote yes.?

As the discussion continued, Councillor Gallo said, ?ultimately what I hear is we're afraid of the developer and that is not what I stand for,? a statement which sparked disagreement from other members of Council.

?Just because I am not totally in love with retail for this site doesn't mean I don't believe in the OP and that I am afraid of

developers," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "What I would like to see is that we're providing appropriate housing in the appropriate areas of our Town. I have seen enough empty retail on the bottom of apartment buildings and condos. It's a shame. This is north of Wellington, it is further out from our downtown core. I can't see anyone using those except the people who live in the building and they will probably be using it conveniently when they want or heading out.

"Housing is an issue. We need to increase that, but this development, to me, doesn't mean that it is out of the window because we don't have retail on the main floor; it has way more benefits than negatives for me."

Mayor Tom Mrakas also pushed back on the claims that Council members were "afraid" of developers.

"I believe we need to make a decision," he said. "Any Councillor who believes this is not right, vote against this. Let's make a decision. That is our obligation to the community: making decisions on their behalf. We're hearing it from the Province constantly that they want to take away our powers to decide how our community grows and here we are giving them a prime example of why they want to take those powers away.

"Let's stand up, make a decision and show the Province that we are adults and we can make those decisions. I will not be in favour of the referral."

The amendments were approved by Council on a vote of 5 to 2 with the dissenting votes coming from Councillor Gallo, as well as Councillor Wendy Gaertner who had previously voiced infrastructure concerns over the plan.

"There are just too many unresolved issues," she said. "If we're going to amend the OP, there should be a substantial community benefit and that just isn't here. I think this application needs more work."

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