

Rental housing development clears first Council hurdle

New purpose-built rental units are often cited as a missing piece of Aurora's housing puzzle, but a proposed new development on Wellington Street West might help fill some of the gaps.

Sitting at the Committee level last week, Council signed off on a zoning bylaw amendment that could help pave the way for nearly 60 new rental units at 145 and 147 Wellington Street West. If ratified by Council later this month, the next phase of the planning process will begin.

Property owners have proposed a new infill development on a site which is already home to two multi-unit residential buildings. The plan is for 53 new rental townhouse units to be built to complement of the existing buildings.

When this application was originally submitted to the Town [there were] 64 units to be constructed on the site, T.J. Cieciora, Principal Planner and President of Starlight Investment, told Council last week. The new proposal, as revised through the process, and after extensive consultation with the public, has been revised down to 53 new townhouse dwellings, in addition to the existing apartment units, for a total of 260 units that would be on site.

The proposal has been subject to significant public input, recently hitting the table during the Public Planning process where nearby residents – some of whom live in the existing buildings – spoke out about the impact the development might have on the surrounding community as well as the parking situation for those who might be displaced during the construction process.

A total of 295 parking spaces have been proposed for the completed development, which Mr. Cieciora said represents a single parking space for every residential unit and .1 visitor parking spaces per unit. In the meantime, proponents of the development said they were close to striking a deal with the nearby Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church on Wellington Street West, located approximately 400 metres from the building site, where they would be allowed to erect temporary parking on their large lawn.

This shows the majority of our tenants will be able to park on site during construction, said Mark Chemi of Starlight Investments at the same meeting, noting that some parking spaces will be available where they currently sit, allocated to residents based on mobility, children, and additional factors. We have to go through our tenant list at the time of construction, which won't be for another year, but anyone who has mobility needs will [be able to stay on site].

In making their pitch, the Starlight representatives underscored the benefits their proposal will bring to Aurora.

?Rental housing is something that is needed in Ontario and in Aurora,? said Mr. Cieciora. ?This is an important project and this, to our knowledge, is the only purpose-built rental project that we're aware of in Aurora that will ultimately add to the range and mix of housing in the neighbourhood.?

Added Mr. Chemi: ?We are asking for Council to approve the rezoning application today. I think everyone in the room is aware that Aurora is a great place to live and is a very desirable place to live. Our site benefits from location to many amenities, access to transit, proximity to downtown and great schools. However, there is a lack of rental supply in Aurora and this will bring some [badly needed] units.

?We will continue to work in the community, with our neighbours, with our tenants throughout construction if we are approved tonight.?

While that approval ultimately came at the Committee level, the nearly two-dozen community members who sat in Council Chambers last week to hear Council's tentative verdict were less than pleased when they left following the decision.

Indeed, Council's approval came with some reluctance as well.

?This has been a long process and it started in last term that we have been dealing with this one,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas. ?I think every step of the way we have been asking the applicant to look at basically some things that are concerning to the residents and to this Council. I think, so far, every step they have come back and they have kind of answered those concerns; maybe not to the best that we would like to see, but ultimately we all need to understand ? and we have pointed this out to the residents and to each other sitting here ? that there is an appeals process, there is LPAT (Local Planning and Appeals Tribunal), and I know with purpose-built rentals, if this Council was to say no, you're going to go to LPAT, LPAT will overturn that decision I guarantee in a second, and all we would do is just waste tax dollars.

?So, when you look at it, it is always about how do we work with the applicant to get the best for our community and for the residents in the area? While it might not be the most ideal, I think, at the end of the day, they have answered a lot of those questions, they have provided us with a solution to offsite parking. Like I said, it might not be the most ideal, but I think this is the best thing for our Town as an overall solution.?

Councillor Sandra Humfries offered a similar viewpoint, reaffirming her commitment to getting answers on behalf of impacted residents.

?We heard the residents loud and clear,? she said, suggesting the establishment of a ?hotline? to streamline communications for any concerns between residents, the municipality and developers, ?to make sure we listen to all the issues and complaints moving forward [and] do our best to understand that as we move forward.?

By Brock Weir