

Retail set to make a comeback at former Canadian Tire site

By Brock Weir

Canadian Tire may have moved from Yonge Street to Bayview Avenue, but the company is looking to re-invest in its old site and bring new retail opportunities to Aurora's south end.

Canadian Tire's former store on Yonge Street just south of Murray Drive has stood vacant since its move in 2016 and the company has applied to Council for new zoning provisions that would open the door to a series of changes on-site, including a reconfiguration in parking and the construction of a new drive-thru restaurant at the Yonge Street side of the property.

If their plans are brought to fruition, the present building will be divided into three commercial units with a new loading dock.

Currently, the property has very restrictive zoning on it which is just to permit a Canadian Tire-type store with some ancillary restaurant-type uses, said David Waters, Director of Planning & Development Services, for the Town of Aurora. However, in order to make the property more marketable at the end of the day, the applicant has come in and expanded the range of uses for the property. They do confirm with the Official Plan [and while] the Official Plan and York Region Official Plan do provide for higher order uses, at this point in time, the site is not ready to move in that direction, but those development rights are within the plans for both the Region and the Town.

Although all plans for the property, which is no longer for sale by Canadian Tire, are subject to future site plan approvals, Council is set to give the green light to zoning bylaw amendment changes this week after giving the thumbs-up at the Committee level last Tuesday night.

Some Council members, however, expressed some misgivings on the proposal, particularly from Councillors Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo who questioned whether the plan meets intensification targets, fulfils the vision of the Aurora Promenade Plan, and what impacts - negative or otherwise - the changes might have on homes on the west side of the property.

From the residents' perspective, Councillor Gaertner said she had concerns about the noise the proposed drive-thru would create for area residents, along with the noise from loading zones. An additional concern, she said, was the current right-of-way at Mosaics Avenue, which shares access to Murray Drive with the plaza to the

north.

On his part,

Councillor Gallo said he wanted more clarity on how the proposals conformed with the Town's Official Plan and in particular the Aurora Promenade Plan which focuses on building a pedestrian-oriented community through higher densities and placing midrise to high-rise built forms closer to the street, buffered by appropriate transitions, with parking in behind.

?I envisioned

something different on the site, particularly when it comes to the Promenade study and all the work that was done,? said Councillor Gallo. ?I just feel like we're getting just more ?big box' and that doesn't sit too well.

?In its current

state, it is very restrictive and I would agree with that. Although my comfort level isn't very high, is there an opportunity to go through the site plan process prior to the rezoning of the properties so that my and perhaps others' confidence would be slightly higher if the commitment from the owners is to go through the site plan process prior to us doing the rezoning? I know it is not common, but it has definitely been done before.?

Mr. Waters responded

that Canadian Tire has decided to take a two-step approach with this plan, going for the rezoning first, followed by the site plan process.

?If I had a choice,

they would?go through the site plan process prior to the rezoning of the property,? said Councillor Gallo. ?I will sit and ponder that for the time being.?

Councillor Michael

Thompson, on the other hand, said the proposal from Canadian Tire is very much in line with what was there before as well as the uses of lands surrounding the site, particularly the Smart Centre plaza just to the north, which is anchored by Winners.

?It is hard to

distinguish between one property versus another,? said Councillor Thompson. ?While I would agree there are a lot of us who thought this would be an excellent opportunity for other kinds of development, they did have the property for sale for a period of time and were trying to perhaps move in that direction, there were some other issues we might not be privy to, but at the end of the day that is what the applicant has come forward with.?

While Councillor

Harold Kim said he would welcome further dialogue with Canadian Tire to make sure what they want is in synch with what the Town envisions, Mayor Tom Mrakas said having something on site is better than leaving the lands vacant.

?It is better off that something be there, be open, instead of it being vacant and empty,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?We have complained many times about the Canadian Tire being vacant and empty, so I would rather see some stores in there available to the residents in the area instead of being empty.

?I think as we move forward, down the road more people will look into the area and possibly look at picking up this property and maybe looking at changing its use at that time.?