

Tall building conundrum

INTERPRETING THE GUIDELINES

By Edward LaRusic

A 32-storey student residence in downtown Toronto is going to the Ontario Municipal Board, with the city and developer at odds over whether the site is appropriate for a tall building and whether it responds to the guidelines.

Ward 27 Toronto Centre-Rosedale councillor **Kristyn Wong-Tam** said the application by **CHC MPAR Church Holdings Inc.** for a 32-storey, mixed use building at 412 Church Street represents an “overbuild” of its site.

“They are just simply asking for far too much density on a site that’s too small.”

On Tuesday, Toronto and East York Community Council adopted staff recommendations to oppose CHC MPAR’s appeal at the OMB. CHC MPAR had applied for a zoning by-law amendment to permit a 32-storey, mixed-use, privately-run student residence on the 907 m² site, giving it an overall floor space index of 15.09. The staff report said the proposal “cannot be said to pay even lip service to the Tall Building Guidelines or applicable policies of the official plan.”

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Countering the culture of convenience

ACTIVE CITY DESIGN

By Leah Wong

Public health and city planning experts agree that designing a city that encourages an active lifestyle promotes healthier behaviour and has the added benefit of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

While the 17 per cent of residents that live in downtown Toronto have active lifestyles and are more likely to walk or bike to work, in order to promote active living in less-dense neighbourhoods a multi-discipline approach is needed.

“In reality there are many places in our city that are fabulous for walking. And, in fact, those are the areas that are growing the fastest,” chief planner **Jennifer Keesmaat** told Active City Forum participants. “And there are places where it is difficult to be active. Places where activity was designed out intentionally. It was a conscience decision to create a city of convenience.”

Last summer council adopted recommendations from medical officer of health Dr. **David McKeown**, Keesmaat and transportation services general manager **Stephen Buckley**, in collaboration with **Gladki Planning Associates** and **DTAH**, concerning the role the built environment plays in promoting health. It also directed the authors to host a forum on the active city.

The Active City Forum, held at **Ryerson** CONTINUED PAGE 6 ▶

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University on Wednesday, connected staff from the three divisions with consultants and community organizations to discuss how to make Toronto a healthier city through urban interventions.

“We’ve only scratched the service, this culture of convenience is deep and it’s pervasive,” said Board of Health chair and Ward 21 St. Paul’s councillor **Joe Mihevc**. “[The challenge] is to move over into a culture of physical activity. To something that gets us moving and active and gets us to just enjoy life in a different way.”

While the city has made efforts to make cycling safer and to encourage active transportation, more needs to be done to counter the effects of a city that was originally designed to separate all aspects of life. This is most prevalent in the more suburban areas of the city that were designed in a way that required people to drive between home, work and their amenities.

McKeown said that chronic health problems, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, which affect a growing number of Torontonians, are associated with how people live and move around the city. Research shows in order to change people’s behaviour it isn’t enough to educate them on healthy living, the environment around them needs to change.

“There is some science behind this. There is research that tells us that a certain way of building cities is more likely to encourage and support healthy and active living,” said McKeown.

While adding density is often seen as the way to encourage people to use active modes of transportation, experts say it’s not the only solution.

University of British Columbia urban design chair **Patrick Condon** said density is not the sole solution to improving walkability. He points to cities such as Copenhagen, which is praised for its cycling network, that have medium density with mixed-uses over very large areas rather than pockets of high-density near rapid transportation.

“The benefits of walkability and greenhouse gas reduction don’t necessarily come easiest and earliest with tower densities, such as in Hong Kong, but rather in townhouse densities,” said Condon.

He said when these densities of around 100 people per hectare are combined with a mix of amenities it creates an environment where homes and services are close enough together that people will use active forms of transportation.

Keesmaat agrees that density is not the only solution, noting

that downtown Toronto is not successful just because it is dense. This is particularly evident when you look at the city’s tower communities, which have residential density but are not very walkable.

Keesmaat said tower neighbourhood renewal will be a critical part of transforming more suburban areas into walkable neighbourhoods. Adding a mix of uses and amenities will help people get around in a different way. The challenge is finding the financial viability to improve the suburbs when there isn’t the same level of investment in infrastructure as in downtown. It’s a matter of figuring out how to bring new uses when there’s not a natural market demand for new uses.

When it comes to designing areas that promote active living as the areas that are less connected, equity is another challenge as the people who have lower household incomes tend live in areas that are less connected.

“The areas of the city that are poorer are also the areas of our city that are less supportive in their urban form of physical activity,” said McKeown. While the more urban parts of the city have network connections that allow people to get around on foot or bike, the suburban areas have fewer network connections as they were designed for car use. It makes it harder for people to get to local services without a car and transit service is more fragmented as there isn’t high density to support rapid transportation.

Improving residents’ ability to travel using active modes of transportation in the suburbs also makes the city more sustainable by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Condon said that issues of walkability, sustainability and health all connect.

“If you have walkability and the [associated] health effects, you also get greenhouse gas reductions,” said Condon. [nru](#)