

Battle erupts over future of midtown

Height restrictions for Yonge, Eglinton worry councillors

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A fresh battle erupted yesterday for the soul of Yonge and Eglinton.

The city's proposed official plan for the area, crafted after the bitter fight over two tall condo towers a decade ago, was approved by the city's planning and growth committee yesterday. But its height restrictions, limiting future development to 40 storeys, still have the neighbourhood's councillors worried the upper limit could edge much higher -- especially when the city looks to off-load a prime piece of midtown real estate.

Councillors Michael Walker (St. Paul's), Cliff Jenkins (Don Valley West) and Karen Stintz (Eglinton Lawrence) fear without concrete commitments in the official plan, the developers could negotiate even taller towers on the site of a former Toronto Transit Commission bus garage the city is considering selling.

"We'll end up with another Minto on publicly owned land," said Mr. Walker, referring to the pair of 50- and 37-storey towers south of Eglinton. "It's being stripped of all the guarantees that we need."

The sale of the TTC yards has been rumoured since the establishment of Build Toronto, a new city agency formed to dispose of city-owned assets that is chaired by Mayor David Miller.

Mr. Miller is in Basel, Switzerland, on business this week, but his office said he doesn't support the kind of set-in-stone guarantees the councillors for the area are seeking.

"The limitation of height is already contained in the report and the draft zoning bylaw," said Stuart Green, a spokesman for the Mayor. "It's really unusual for a future real estate transaction to be contained in the official plan."

Ms. Stintz said the objectives of Build Toronto and the community could be on a collision course, since the agency, led by the Mayor, will be looking to maximize the value of the lands, while the community wants some "reasonable" parameters.

"Politically speaking it's a concern ... because we're not on the side of the Mayor and the Mayor would not necessarily consider our view strongly with respect to protecting the community, versus making money on the sale of this land," she said. "It's rather unfortunate because the community has spent a lot of time and resources and put their faith in this process. And this process may in fact let them down."

But Councillor Adam Vaughan (Trinity Spadina), who is himself no proponent of unbridled development, couldn't resist the urge to point out the irony of fiscally conservative councillors leading the charge to rein in the private sector.

His comments caused an uproar at the meeting and offered a sneak peak of what may be in store for the next sitting of city council, which will consider the plan.

"Councillor Stintz in particular has been flooding the council chambers with motions ... that said we should get it done differently. So I find it really interesting that the first time a piece of property [near] her ward comes up for sale, she says, 'No, no, no, no, no, not highest and best use, not maximum land values, don't maximize the return to the taxpayer, protect my community and strata sale it,' " Mr. Vaughan said.

"Which is it, Karen? Do you want to sell everything at highest and best cost and who cares whose neighbourhood it's in, or is it just in your neighbourhood you want protection, the rest of the city be damned?"

The official plan prescribes an urban park, pedestrian walkways, a new north-south side street, low-rise residential housing and mixed-use office and condo towers -- all fully integrated with bus routes, the Yonge subway line and a new crosstown light rail line. The maximum height of buildings would angle downward under the proposed guidelines the farther away they are located from the thoroughfares, with up to 40 storeys allowed on Yonge and Eglinton.

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