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THE SAULT STAR



Council gives opposed townhouse plan the thumbs up

The single-storey townhouses will be market-value two-bedroom rental units and all will be barrier free

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The City of Sault Ste. Marie logo, as seen in council chambers.

A strongly opposed rezoning application that will see five townhouses created at the former Brookfield Market property on Second Line, has received the nod from city council.

The application, filed by an Ontario Inc business owned by David Toppan and Benjamin Cicchelli, met significant opposition from area residents but was well within good planning policy guidelines, council heard.

The property is the former Brookfield Market property at Second Line and North Eden Street. The applicants want to retain the house that fronts onto Second Line but also create five new townhouses fronting onto North Eden Street and Second Line.

The single-storey townhouses will be market-value two-bedroom rental units and all will be barrier free.

City staff recommended the application be approved because it fits within the neighbourhood but area residents countered that is not the case.

The nearby neighbourhood consists of half-acre lots with modest single-detached homes that were created decades ago under the Veterans Land Act for war veterans and most are still owned by their family members, council heard. That act was terminated in 1977.

“I do think this application is compatible with the area,” said Don McConnell, the city’s planning director.

Councillors noted that this application has received the greatest opposition received since council was appointed.

Opponents argued that the townhouse units don’t fit with the half-acre lots in the historical subdivision, where the neighbours have known each other for years and lived in a park-like setting, sharing garden vegetables, allowing kids to run freely in what is deemed a safe environment.

One resident will lose a treed lot behind her property and instead be able to see the townhouse unit planned directly behind her home, council heard.

Sandra McFarling said she’s concerned about the precedent set by creating the homes on less than a half-acre lot.

She also raised concern about the units being rental with a high turnover of neighbours and limited parking.

Four other opponents concurred with McFarling’s concerns and also noted that traffic issues at the North Eden and Second Line intersection is already difficult with a busy Second Line.

McConnell agreed that opposition was high both to the city’s planning department and to city councillors.

Toppan was asked if he would hold an open house, via zoom, in the coming weeks, but Toppan said he wanted a decision on the application so that he can move forward with his building plans.

“This is the first time this has happened, to have this much opposition to a development,” McConnell said, despite increased information being provided in the letters sent out.

Most of the opposition has happened over the past week, despite reaching out in May to the area residents.

“We were caught a little bit by surprise on that,” McConnell said.

Mayor Christian Provenzano said he believes there is a need to address the push back to the application but believes the concerns could be addressed with a zoom meeting. He agrees that some of those issues might be cleared up with a meeting.

That may in part be due to the fact that COVID-19 has prevented the applicants from holding an open house to share their plans and iron out concerns the abutting neighbourhood has.

A letter of intent was sent to the surrounding neighbourhood within 120 metres of the site, but Toppan told city council that only one person voiced concern about the application.

Toppan said his company is about the fifth owner of the property and there is no record of tanks on the property, but neighbours say there once was a gas station there.

McConnell said that a record of site condition may be required by the building department if the zoning application is passed. It will be up to the applicant to deal with any tanks at that time.

Ward 5 Coun. Corey Gardi questioned Toppan on his use of the word “degentrify” in his letter to neighbours.

Toppan said the term was used in context of his own property – that meaning to improve the property with new housing and attract business to the area. He said there was black mold found on the boarded up property and the term was used in connection to his property only.

Council was reminded that good planning principles must be applied to rezoning applications and either party can appeal a decision that doesn’t follow planning policies.

Despite that, both Ward 5 councillors – Matthew Scott and Corey Gardi – said their duty was to represent the citizens of the ward and as a result of that, would oppose the rezoning application.

Scott said he’s received significant opposition to the application and believes he should be a good voice for the ward.

“In this particular case, the outpouring of opposition has been there, and I understand what the developers are going for but in this case I think I need to oppose the application and be a voice for my constituents,” he said.

Gardi agreed. "I've had dozens of communications about this. They are adamantly opposed to this. I think there is something to be said to maintaining this neighbourhood."

Ward 2 Coun. Luke Dufour congratulated the applicant for their application and noted that there is a lack of supply in the local housing market and that has created an affordability issue in Sault Ste. Marie.

Infilling and creating an increase supply of housing makes housing more affordable and beautifies vacant lots, he said.

"It's important that we continue to approve and support these applications, Dufour said, adding there is ways the valid concerns can be addressed through the process.

It was also noted that about four years ago, an applicant had filed a rezoning application to build two single family dwellings but that application also received opposition and the applicant withdrew the rezoning request.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said that based on the past applications for the same property, opposition will always be there from the existing neighbours.

"While I can appreciate the appeal of having a vacant property next to you or around you with mature trees in it, that cannot be an impediment to improvements in our community. No matter what was proposed for this lot, there will be community opposition in the neighbourhood," Shoemaker said. "This is recommended by planning and is within planning principles."

The rezoning application passed in a 9-2 vote.