

Report on the New Edinburgh Community Alliance Public Consultation Regarding the Beechwood-MacKay Redevelopment Site, January 16, 2013

Late in 2012, it was reported that the Minto Group Inc was in the process of acquiring the above site at the corner of Beechwood Avenue and MacKay Street. The company had already developed some initial plans for a new building to be erected in this location.

The New Edinburgh Community Alliance (NECA) organized, on short notice, a public consultation to review Minto's plans and provide feedback from the community, both to the developer and to the City of Ottawa. Members of the New Edinburgh community were invited along with residents of adjacent communities including Vanier, Lindenlea, Manor Park, and Rockcliffe Park. Representatives of Minto agreed to attend and present information concerning their plans. They also generously agreed to provide audiovisual equipment for the event. Representatives of the City of Ottawa, including both elected representatives and City staff, also attended.

Approximately 180 persons, including the representatives of Minto and the City, attended the event, which was moderated by NECA Acting President David Sacks. A member of the NECA Board of Directors, Catherine Lindquist, provided a summary of some of the City and Ontario Municipal Board–approved planning and design parameters that apply to the site. Representatives of the Minto Group then presented their plans.

Following these presentations, community members were invited to sit at one of six tables where conversations, led by a facilitator, took place on four sets of questions that had previously been developed by members of the NECA board. While some community members left after the Minto presentation, a majority remained in the hall to take part in the table discussions.

The questions dealt with Minto's design plans (discussed by two tables), their intentions regarding retail stores on the site (two tables), parking and transportation issues (one table), and the "green" or environmental dimensions of Minto's proposals (one table). Following table deliberations, representatives from each table provided a report on the main points discussed. The following is a summary of the issues raised by community members. (This report draws upon the summary presentations of table facilitators and also upon more detailed notes that were taken at each table.)¹

Design

Two tables discussed this issue. Interestingly, the reactions of both tables were very similar, although there was no communication between tables. Noting that the Beechwood Community Design Plan call for developments that are varied, on a human scale, and in line with the nature of the existing community, participants wondered why the Minto design was not more reflective of the New Edinburgh community character. They were generally unenthusiastic in their comments on the proposed design.

One table spoke of a "lack of continuity with the feel" of surrounding community buildings. The other table suggested that while the building itself was quite nice looking,

¹ Comments were received from several community members following the meeting; some of their observations are cited in this report if they were illustrative of themes that emerged from the table discussions. All comments received following the event were consistent with views expressed at the meeting itself.

the glass and concrete structure was cold and lacked variety and colour. Community members would have preferred brick as the main building material, and commented that the building looked as if it would be better suited to downtown Toronto. "It's like a cuckoo in a robin's nest," said one participant.

A resident who sent in comments after the consultation event captured the spirit of the conversation at the tables. He wrote, "I liked the example the architect showed us in his presentation of the midrise building his firm completed in Toronto, which I believe was faced in red brick. Why was this not considered by the architect for this project? If he was more familiar with this neighbourhood he would I hope realize how much more ... this material would be in keeping with ... the architecture in New Edinburgh."

Spokespersons for the tables stressed the desirability of having more retail at the street level, and a greater setback of the building from the street to allow for more activity at the street level, and more space for trees, benches, and pedestrians.

Regarding the height of the building, community members thought that the Beechwood front loomed too much over the street. They preferred the MacKay Street façade, which was less massive. One table wondered whether there might be shadow issues because of the building's size.

Community members generally felt that a less massive structure, more in character with the local village, would have been preferable, with fewer floors, as provided for in the City's Official Plan, and recessed at the 2nd floor rather than the 5th. A resident who sent an email to NECA after the meeting expressed disappointment with the structure, stating, "I feel that it adds nothing to the character of this neighbourhood," also reiterating concerns regarding insufficient setback and too much height close to the street.

Retail

Facilitators from both tables strongly emphasized the wish of community members to have more, smaller, independently owned retailers, and to avoid the presence of any "big box" or conventional chain stores in the complex.² It was agreed by all that the top priority was a new hardware store. Loss of the previous hardware store on the fire site has been a major inconvenience, not only for New Edinburgh but also for adjacent communities. Other kinds of stores mentioned that might be welcome on the site were, for example, a bakery, an LCBO, or a dry cleaning establishment.

One table suggested that a "Retail Plan" be formulated by Minto. This could be the subject of subsequent consultations with NECA concerning the nature and character of stores in the complex.

In view of the kinds of stores desired by the community, participants urged Minto not to charge rents that would put the retail space out of reach of such businesses, but to ensure that they remain affordable. "What we are looking for," said one table facilitator "is a range of essential community services, tailored to the diverse needs of the

² A community member with experience in development who provided comments after the consultation advised that small retailers were in some instances preferable to larger ones. This individual pointed out how larger stores in the ByWard market area (such as the Fresh Fruit Company) often have difficulty surviving because of higher overheads, whereas smaller retailers can be more successful in weathering economic pressures. If smaller retailers are to be accommodated in the new Beechwood building, this individual suggested that Minto should consider providing for individualized electric, air-conditioning, and similar services tailored to more stores with smaller square footage.

community at large, opening directly onto the street.”

Participants at one table noted that there were several residences for seniors in the area. They hoped this retail complex would not simply turn into a kind of “medical old folks’ corner” with a suite of stores uniquely directed to the needs of senior citizens.

Both tables discussing retail commented on issues similar to those raised by the design tables. As one table stated, “What we like are trees, benches, attractive lamps, public patios as mentioned in the Minto presentation. We would like warmer colors, and a design more reflective of the heritage character of the community. What we don’t like are the building materials, the sterile character of the proposed development, and the assertiveness of huge window at the corner.” Like the design tables, the retail tables emphasized with concern the desirability of more setback for the new building.

With respect to the location of retail stores, participants questioned why stores might not also be located with frontages on MacKay Street, as in the past. One of the tables also wondered whether it might be possible to have retail stores accommodated on the second floor in addition to the stores at street level. (Some stores in this location might be able to provide specialized services of the kinds needed by elderly people.)

Parking and Transportation

A single table discussed these issues. The concerns voiced by participants at this table all dealt in one way or another with the intensification of traffic activity around the new building. The larger the building, the more traffic it will attract – residents, shoppers, delivery trucks, etc. Participants expressed concern that this new development, with nearly 200 parking spaces, could have a negative impact on safety and congestion in the area. In comments addressed in part to the City, they asked what might be done to diminish the volume of local traffic, for example through improved public transit, through better measures to accommodate bicycles or pedestrians, etc. What could Minto do, working with the City, to address this question?

Participants also wondered whether it might be possible to have a “through lane” behind the complex, allowing access to parking from both Crichton Street and MacKay Street. At the moment, there is parking access from both of these streets. The presence of two proposed lanes into the parking area from MacKay was seen as a plus, but probably not enough to accommodate the greater volume. If access for parking at the new building is limited to MacKay Street, they predicted significant congestion problems at that location, especially first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. The MacKay-Beechwood corner is already a congested area much of the time, and unless there are some changes to the existing plans for traffic around the new building, the problem would just get worse.

Finally, participants commented on the width of the retail parking spaces provided for in Minto’s plans. It was their impression that while the number of spaces for access to retail seemed adequate, the width of the retail parking spaces was below the standards set by the City. There are quite a number of larger vehicles such as SUVs in the surrounding communities, and smaller spaces would create difficulties for vehicles of this size.

Sustainability and Environmental Issues

The participants discussing these questions indicated that they were pleased with the

commitment that Minto had made to the LEED program; however, they wondered to what extent “green” considerations were reflected in the building on Beechwood as these were not specified in Minto’s presentation. Participants identified several areas where they thought that environmental and related issues needed to be taken into account.

Concerning the idea of having a “green” roof, participants asked, what is the area of the roof and what portion of it is being treated in this way?

They noted that the building contained a great deal of glass. Is such a large expanse of glass consistent with sound environmental policy? What kind of glass would be used on the site? There did not appear to be any provision for balconies that could let in fresh air. Likewise, the plans presented by Minto did not seem to provide for any awnings to provide shade. Given these characteristics of the building, it appeared to participants that the air-conditioning system would be subject to very significant demands and would probably have to be in continuous operation throughout the summer months.

Another environmentally related issue had to do with the height of the building. The nine storeys exceed what is allowed under current zoning, and the plans presented by Minto did not provide for a 45° angle related to the slope of upper floors. As at other tables, participants at this one favoured a lower rise building that was less massive and compliant with existing zoning. They noted that the bulk of this building dwarfs the adjacent pharmacy, and there could be a danger of a wind tunnel effect due to the building’s proximity to other tall buildings.

Another issue that came up at this table was similar to those that came up at the table considering transportation issues. Participants were concerned about the intensification of traffic turning onto MacKay from Beechwood, about congestion and logjams in this area. They were also concerned about safety and the effect of the building on traffic turning onto Beechwood from MacKay. Noting that this might be an issue more appropriately brought to the attention of the City than Minto, they wondered if it might be desirable to make this corner sharper (e.g. a 90° angle), so that traffic would be slowed at this intersection.

Like all the other tables, this table noted the need for greater setback of the building, allowing for a wider sidewalk that would be more pedestrian-friendly and better able to accommodate trees, which would be more environmentally responsible.

Finally, participants wondered about the impact of the building on water use, and what measures might have been taken to allow for recycling or to minimize waste (for example, in connection with the air-conditioning system).

Overall, participants at this table requested that Minto give consideration to the preparation of a Green Plan that would address issues of the kinds mentioned above. A plan such as this, shared with the community, would make it possible to have a more informed dialogue about the environmental dimensions of the proposed development.