

Study proposes demolition of stately River Road homes

Sept 18/80
BY LYNDA POWLESS
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One of several proposals revealed in the unveiling of the River Road Study Wednesday calls for turning the area into a scenic parkway.
The alternative, one of four presented to the planning and development committee, calls for demolishing the existing stately homes, turning the

area into a park, and widening River Road.

The Con Rail line would serve as a "defensive boundary" between residential and commercial development proposed to the west of River Road.

Senior planner Doug Darby said the proposal also called for construction of a new north-south road leading from the proposed Ministry of

Transportation and Communication (MTC) Highway 420 ramp, through the newly created commercial district (behind River Road) and funneling tourist traffic into the downtown area.

"It's an imaginative concept and cost of implementation is beyond us," he said.

"It isn't far fetched; there are ways of implementing it," he said.

But before any of the four redevelopment plans are undertaken the study indicates the need for a geological study of the area.

The 31-page report prepared by the city's planning department says problems of stresses and faulting should be investigated to determine areas more susceptible to faulting and what areas have the "load-bearing capacity to accommodate new development."

"There could be a problem with stress and faulting in the area," said Mr. Darbyson.

He told the committee should they select one of the four alternatives, the parkway theory could be implemented by interesting the Niagara Parks Commission (NPC) in the plan.

"The NPC has the power to expropriate and can create the park, enhancing their own roadway," said Alec Greaves planning director.

OTHER CHOICES

The "in-house" study includes choices of: preserving the neighborhood flavor now existing with low density hous-

ing, residential redevelopment or residential with limited commercial development.

The first alternative, preserving the existing neighborhood is the most obvious, the report says.

The report says 85 per cent of the area is single family housing, "houses that are in remarkably good condition considering the age of the buildings or are undergoing rehabilitation through the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program and private home improvements."

To preserve the residential character, Mr. Darbyson said the city should implement the property standards bylaw, "there are problems with property maintenance in the area particularly with rental units and absentee landlords," he said.

Allowing for residential redevelopment would switch the focus from preserving today's neighborhood to mixing the households by converting the stately homes to apartment units or tourist homes.

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Scenic parkway for River Road?

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Limited commercial development would allow tourist commercial development in the north and south quadrants he said.

He said the River Road area is a stable residential area undergoing rejuvenation. "Young families are moving into the area because of the modestly priced homes," he said.

PLANS DISCARDED

Two secondary alternatives studied by the planning department and discarded were commercialization of the River Road strip allowing strip commercial development, and total demolition turning the area into a park.

"The park concept would simply add to Queen Victoria Park," he said.

Committee members, excited with the idea of turning River Road into a scenic parkway, agreed before any decisions are made council must be made aware of the report.

The committee will hold a joint meeting with council Oct. 6.

Committee members zeroed in on the major stumbling block to any re-development plans of the area, "the key to the whole issue is what the MTC plans to do with its proposed Highway 420 ramp," said Ald. Brian Merrett.

"Until they get off the pot and do something we're going to sit on plans until doomsday. They have admitted they don't have the money for the ramp but say its the only plan they

do have so we have to wait," he argued.

He also said the ongoing traffic and parking study of the tourist commercial areas would have to be completed and the two reports jointly studied.

Ald. Mary Sobol said it was time for the city to proceed and forget the MTC's missing link. "The only way we'll get any action from the MTC is if we proceed, then they will take action."

Ald. Buck Hinsperger said the move would lessen the danger of a rock fall by moving the load further away from the gorge edge and help the downtown area by bringing the tourists there.

Ald. Dave MacKenzie agreed the idea was attractive but impractical. "Costs to acquire the lands would skyrocket as soon as you mention commercial zoning. Getting the people out of the area would be difficult, we'd end up with expropriating through a provincial body and services would have to go in for the new commercial area."

Ald. Mary Sobol suggested the report be sent to the NPC for their comments or the parking and traffic study advisory committee.

Ald. John Graaskamp said he wanted to hear what the residents had to say before any scheme was chosen.

"We've gone against them too many times. With the expansion of Michael's Inn — the committee approved expanding the motel by allowing two storeys to be built on just a few weeks ago — and by allowing tourist commercial development north of Michael's Inn," he said.

He said River Road was not a major priority and downtown should come first. "They aren't in trouble. The downtown problems overshadow River Road."

Ald. Don Dilts said offers of redevelopment in the area make it a priority.

River Rd. property anguished man for more than 30 years

April 26/79
For Jack Brown the northwest corner of River Road and John Street has spelled frustration and unhappiness for 30 years.

"And that's long enough," Mr. Brown told the planning committee Wednesday.

The land is now being considered as a motel site.

In 1946 his father bought the land, zoned residential, to build a fine home among other "first class residences."

In 1948 the father died. Since then Mr. Brown has tried five times to build on the land.

He has consulted with planners, and engineers, provincial, regional and city officials. He has been shunned by neighbors and completely frustrated.

"Let me do something with the land," he begged the committee.

His first development proposal was for a high rise apartment building. It was in the early days when high rise in Niagara Falls meant four storeys and he was turned down. He has tried various heights and numbers of units without success.

"Every time I came into this town with a plan I had consulted with every city official I could find and had their approval," he said.

He is equally tired of trying to get answers from the Ministry of Transportation and Communications.

He has been told at various times that the new bridge approach on Highway 420 would go through his land - skirt his land - nowhere near the land.

Depending on who he spoke to he was told the road may be built within five years.

He said he has learned the 1981 budget for the Rainbow Bridge Commission includes money to remove toll booths at the Canadian end of the bridge, move them to the American end, and widen the exits.

"And MTC is working now to widen 420 west of Stanley," he said. "This was to be the first class residences."

step, followed by gradual grading east of Stanley and eventual work on the bridge plaza.

"I have spent months and years trying to build something on this land and I feel there has been discrimination," he said.

"Tell me what to do with the land," he begged.

The committee's only answer was to reject the current motel proposal.

NF Review