

Can people power stall mall's demolition plans?

Toronto Star

Apr. 10, 2006. 01:00 AM

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Alexander Nairn, in his kilt and sporrán, took a seat in the food court of the Don Mills Centre on a chilly afternoon. Eileen Gollert sat across from him and rolled her eyes. She said, "I can't believe you wore your flippin' kilt." I said I hoped he would not flip his kilt. They laughed but there was nothing funny about the topic of discussion in the mall the other day. As you know, the Don Mills Centre is about to be torn down and rebuilt. The mall will not be rebuilt in stages, as originally planned; the mall will not remain open during construction, as originally planned. The Don Mills Centre will be razed and rebuilt. Demolition begins soon. The adjacent Dominion supermarket will stay open, as will the Shoppers Drug Mart. But there will be no mall for a couple of years.

The new mall will be very au courant, outdoors, with all the shops separate from each other, built along little artificial "streets."

Residents are upset.

Their concerns are deeply personal. Eileen said, "I've lived in Don Mills for 44 years. Four months ago I bought a condo on The Donway West, just so I could walk to the plaza. I have a son who is disabled. He lives nearby. He's dependent on me. He was in the armed forces and he developed multiple sclerosis. He can only move his left arm. This is the only place he can get to on his own."

No mall for two years will be a deep hardship.

Stan Stevenson, who was sitting with us, helped gather some of the 4,000 signatures on a petition opposing the plans of the developer, Cadillac Fairview. He said, "I use this place to walk in the winter, to meet neighbours and friends. The mall is the centre of the community. It's a place to read, to have a coffee, to do exercise walking. The building opens at 7 a.m., before the stores are open. We have no other place."

An apparent irony, then: Don Mills was our first planned community, but the people for whom it was planned now feel as if they no longer figure in the planning.

Eileen, who is 71, said, "I buy everything I need here. Every item of clothing I own, every pair of shoes."

I was trying to find out just how many pairs of shoes when a woman heard us talking and sidled over with the aid of a walker. "My name is Elizabeth O'Brien. I go by Betty. I'm very unhappy. I'm here three or four times a week. I've just got a nice new hip. I've just started walking again. I'm 74. I was hoping to be able to do mall walking."

Where will she walk when the Don Mills Centre is torn down? "I have no idea but I'm bloody not going to Fairview. I'm mad at them."

An observation: Stan and Betty and their neighbours are a keystone generation. It was their hard work that created Toronto's post-war prosperity, and it was their buying power that made the building of Don Mills possible. But now they are being shoved aside.

I said most of them probably had cars. I said they could probably drive to some new place. Eileen said, pointedly, "I moved here so I didn't have to drive!"

Stan said, "The concept of Don Mills is that you could walk to shop, or walk to your job. There are paths everywhere."

A man named Jim Greer joined us then. He is 71 years old. He said, "I had my eyes checked out a while ago. I stopped driving. I gave up my licence."

He also said, "We bought a condo to be close to the mall. We walk here every day. We eat at Diana Sweets. We buy the stuff we need. I don't know where I'm going to go."

They all told me that two earlier versions of the developer's plans, showing the staged rebuilding of the mall, had been posted inside the Don Mills Centre at one time, so that people could see and understand the process.

The new plans are not posted.

I don't know about you, but I was raised to be courteous; courtesy does not seem part of the new equation in Don Mills.

I cannot tell you how many motorized wheelchairs I saw zipping around the food court over the course of a couple of hours. I cannot, because I lost count.

Jim said, "Down the hall from us is a gal who is severely handicapped. She's in a chair. She said, "When I come to the new mall I'll have to open doors in all those shops."

Alexander, who had been listening quietly said, "They're kicking us in the teeth. They're playing dirty." The others nodded. "When they come here with the bulldozers, if all the residents form a circle ..." The others nodded. "We're not just a bunch of old people yakking away. We have to develop our power and use it."

There will be a public meeting to discuss the plans for the Don Mills Centre tomorrow night at 7:30 p.m. in the ballroom of the old Inn On The Park.

In attendance will be local councillors, and representatives of the developer. Also Eileen, Stan, Jim, Betty, Alexander and their neighbours.

I wonder how they'll use their power.

Joe Fiorito usually appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Email: jfiorito@thestar.ca