

Plan to demolish mall irks Don Mills residents

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Simone Gabbay doesn't want to see the "heart and soul" of the Don Mills community destroyed when a proposed outdoor mall replaces the Don Mills Centre, a fixture in the Don Mills Road and Lawrence Avenue area for more than 50 years.

But Gabbay and some 200 residents who attended a meeting hosted by the Don Mills Residents Inc. Monday night to discuss the proposal might be fighting a losing battle as Cadillac Fairview, owners of the Don Mills Centre, have made it clear they intend to push ahead with plans for an outdoor mall, despite objections from local residents who want to retain a covered mall.

Redevelopment plans include 570,000 square feet of commercial space, 2,600 parking spaces and a 2.7-acre Town Square in the middle of the high-end retail outdoor mall. The square would serve as a skating rink in the winter.

"I found out some tenants can move, but how many can really move?" Gabbay, who resides on Cottonwood Drive, asked The Mirror prior to Monday's meeting at St. Bonaventure Parish Centre at Leslie Street and Lawrence Avenue. "I don't think the mall should be demolished. I don't want to lose an indoor mall. There are numerous seniors and disabled people who frequent the mall every day. The mall is really the heart and soul of the Don Mills community."

Gabbay is in the process of distributing a petition to Don Mills Centre merchants in an effort to save the mall. She also plans to send a copy of the petition to Cadillac Fairview.

"I don't want outdoor stores, why should I lose a shopping centre?" she asked.

Terry West, president of the Don Mills Residents Inc., told the crowd of mostly elderly residents at Monday's meeting the site is zoned commercial and no zoning bylaw changes are needed to proceed with the changes to the retail space, essentially paving the way for whatever Cadillac Fairview has in mind for the property.

But that shouldn't discourage residents from voicing concerns over the outdoor mall proposal, he said, adding there is always hope Cadillac Fairview might change its position over public outcry to keep the mall covered.

"Some people are upset over losing a covered mall," West said, adding Cadillac Fairview declined an invitation to attend the meeting. "Some people think it's worth a try (outdoor mall)."

Ward 25 Councillor Cliff Jenkins (Don Valley West) acknowledged many residents are against the proposal, but said city planning staff are not objecting to an outdoor mall but to storefronts on major streets and a parking lot on Don Mills Road, which will have to be worked out before plans proceed.

Several residents expressed concern over traffic, while others were angered with the thought of having a high-end mall replace the Don Mills Centre.

"They don't want us talking to people, to sit and have a coffee," one angry resident said. "They want to get us into the high-end stores and to get out."

Neil Murphy, corporate communications manager for Cadillac Fairview, said in a telephone interview that the site plan is before council and a community meeting will be held in the spring with residents.

Murphy refuted claims Cadillac Fairview declined to attend Monday's meeting, claiming Don Mills Residents Inc. did not extend an invitation.

"We indicated to them we would do one meeting and if the city was having a (community) meeting, there was no relevance in doing a meeting within six weeks of the community meeting," he said. "We did not decline; we didn't receive notice."

Murphy said Cadillac Fairview is eager to press on with plans, adding their position has been clear on the design of an outdoor mall, which he claims is the first of its kind in Canada.

"The retail vision we have is not something we are backing down on," he said. "I know it's been one bone of contention."

Murphy said Cadillac Fairview is currently in talks with merchants of the Don Mills Centre, which began last summer, but wouldn't say which stores, if any, would be part of the redevelopment plans.

If all goes according to plan, Don Mills Centre will close in May, with construction set for the end of that month. After two years of construction, the new mall is scheduled to open in August 2008.

Cadillac Fairview is also looking at offering free shuttle service from Don Mills Centre to Fairview Mall at Don Mills Road and Sheppard Avenue while the new mall is under construction, but nothing has been finalized, Murphy said.

Once the retail aspect of the development is under way, which is known as Phase 1, Phase 2 will commence, which includes the construction of 1,500 condominium units in five- to 15-storey towers on the property, Murphy said, adding those plans will be revisited once Phase 1 has been approved by council.