

Residents set to protest at Don Mills Centre Saturday

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Residents protesting the demolition and redevelopment plans of the Don Mills Centre say they will hold a peaceful demonstration outside the Lawrence Avenue and Don Mills Road mall Saturday afternoon.

The demonstration, which will be held from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. on the sidewalk on The Donway West across from Diana Sweets, is being held to once again let Cadillac Fairview, owner of the mall, know where residents stand on redevelopment plans, said Simone Gabbay, who has spent months fighting the outdoor mall development.

"It appears Cadillac Fairview still hasn't heard us," she said. "We feel we have to tell them again that we are disappointed with the plans."

Gabbay said protestors will not march or block entrances or customers from entering Don Mills Centre.

"I'm not planning a parade, I'll put it that way," she said. "I don't know how many people will come out, I'm not asking for an RSVP. People have been eager to spread the word and I would not be surprised if we got a good crowd."

Gabbay, who has collected about 5,000 signatures protesting redevelopment plans of the Don Mills Centre, will submit the petition to North York Community Council May 9 when councillors discuss the city's position on the plans for an Ontario Municipal Board hearing May 29 to June 2.

"I just want to get our message across and the best chance to be heard is in a strong and peaceful way," Gabbay said of Saturday's demonstration. "I hope Cadillac Fairview will, in fact, hear us. It's a chance as a community to make our voice known. Some people say it's too late, but I never believe it's too late until things are final. Even if they demolish the mall they can still build a covered mall."

Neil Murphy, communications manager for Cadillac Fairview, said residents are free to protest, but the corporation is going full steam ahead with plans to create an upscale, outdoor shopping centre.

"We've been down this path 100 times," he said. "They (protesters) are looking at demonizing an organization that has spent 50 years creating Don Mills. Our role is to provide service and currently we are not serving the area, we are only serving two per cent of the area. We are not currently serving the retail needs of the community. The bottom line is, plans are going ahead."

While Murphy acknowledged change is a hard pill to swallow, he said profits have been declining at Don Mills Centre for eight years and it's time for a new mall model.

"Yes we can continue running the centre or we can take action," he said. "We have a good project and it's good for the community."

Redevelopment plans for Don Mills Centre include 560,000 square feet of commercial space, 2,050 parking spaces and a 2.7 acre Town Square, which would serve as a skating rink in the winter in the middle of the high-end retail outdoor mall. Heated sidewalks would be installed for easier and safe winter navigating. The new mall is scheduled to open in August 2008.

Once the retail aspect of the development is under way, which is known as Phase 1, Cadillac Fairview says Phase 2 will commence, which would include the construction of 1,200 condominium units in two to 14-storey towers on the property. Don Mills Centre is slated to close May 31.