

Last-ditch petition to save mall

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4,000 appeal to stop Don Mills Centre from being replaced by outdoor facility

By Sandie Benitah

With just weeks to go before the planned demolition of the Don Mills Shopping Centre, residents in the area refuse to give up hope they'll be able to keep their beloved indoor mall.

Nearly 4,000 employees and area residents signed a petition appealing to Cadillac Fairview Corp., the owner of the shopping centre, to reconsider its comprehensive plan for the area.



SIGNING UP TO SAVE CENTRE:
Kamran Razaghypour (left), manager of Don Mills Quality Shoe Repairs, signs Simone Gabbay's petition to prevent the demolition of the Don Mills Shopping Centre.

"The planned closure will put people of this community out of business, out of work, and will deprive the community of services we have come to depend and rely on," reads the petition. It goes on to point out that many seniors in the community, some with mobility problems, will have difficulty enjoying and accessing an outdoor mall.

The mall is set to be torn down in May and replaced with a new outdoor shopping centre and town square. The plan has outraged local residents, especially since the corporation's initial plan called for at least part of the mall to remain indoors.

But despite past promises from the developer, there's almost nothing the city can legally do to appease residents and stop the demolition, as it is Cadillac's legal right to rebuild the mall as it pleases. Right now, all the city can do is argue the logistics of the plan, such as street frontage and entrances.

"Ultimately, they will do what they want to do," said Don Valley West Councillor Cliff Jenkins. "But does that mean we shouldn't try? Should we all just give up?"

Jenkins doesn't think so. In fact, he and the local MPP Kathleen Wynne had scheduled a meeting for April 11 with officials from Cadillac to express the concern and resentment they have been hearing from their constituents about the plan.

"We're going to tell them we don't think it's in their best interest," he said.

Before the application heads to North York community council for final approval in May, residents were to present their petition to developers at a meeting scheduled for April 11, a day after the <I>Town Crier</I> hit the press. Jenkins said he expected about 500 people to attend the meeting.

Simone Gabbay, an area resident who organized the petition, said she will be there to pose some probing questions to mall officials about mall employees being forced out of work and elderly shoppers who will lose their quality of life.

"It just seems really unfair to me when you think of how many people it affects," she said. "We're asking them to work with us and we're trying to appeal to their sense of responsibility."

Aside from heading the petition, Gabbay has organized residents' meetings and has written a number of letters to the mayor, mall officials, even the Governor General.

Neil Murphy, spokesman for Cadillac Fairview, said while there are no plans to abandon the outdoor design, company officials will attend the April meeting as an act of good faith.

He said the petition is "incredibly misleading," and said he's received numerous emails and letters in support of the project.

"It makes some pretty nasty statements about putting people out of work. Our conservative estimates show that about 1,600 jobs will be created out of this," he said. He also estimated the city would get about \$6 million in increased tax revenue that could be reinvested in the community.

"It's going to be a dynamic new centre that will enhance community life," he said. "We've been here (the mall) since 1954. It's our community too."

Murphy also noted the threats he's received from Don Mills residents who promised never to shop at the new mall.

"Where people shop and what they choose to do with their money is always a choice people have," he said. "We've done our research to know this model will be attractive to our existing client base and will also attract others from the community and around the city who don't currently come to the mall because it doesn't serve their need."

In the meantime, Jenkins said there's always some hope left for last-minute negotiations between now and May's council meeting, where the city will either approve or reject the site application. The developer has already taken precautions by applying for an appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board. The OMB hearing will take place at the end of May if the city and the developer do not reach an agreement.

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