

Shopping mall seeking okay to raze, rebuild

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Don Mills Centre just three months away from demolition

By Sandie Benitah

The Don Mills Shopping Centre could be completely torn down in just a few months if the city approves Cadillac Fairview's redevelopment plan.

Cadillac Fairview, a retail management company, plans to close the 51-year-old mall this May. A month later, they'll demolish the building and begin construction on a new shopping complex, with access to all stores only from the outside. The new centre is slated to open in two years.

"Our longterm vision is to recreate Don Mills Centre as a truly central part of the community," reads a statement on the mall's official website. "It has become clear that the most viable way to achieve this vision for a totally revitalized shopping destination is to completely tear down the existing mall. This will effectively reposition the centre with a new and revitalized merchandise mix."

But the company's plans have yet to be approved by city council. A final community consultation meeting among the city, residents and mall officials has been scheduled for April 11. Council is supposed to decide on the matter soon after.

However, council is limited on what it can restrict Cadillac Fairview from doing, considering the company has a right to reconstruct its shopping mall as it pleases. Cliff Jenkins, the city councillor representing the area, said he and MPP Kathleen Wynn have asked for a meeting with the president of Cadillac Fairview to voice their disapproval of the retail project, which he said doesn't conform to the character of Don Mills.

"We want them to understand what the community's position is," he said. "An indoor mall would be very desirable and I think it's in their best interest to serve their existing clientele with an indoor component."

Residents of the Don Mills neighbourhood have been trying to convince local politicians that the development will have a negative impact on the area. Since Cadillac Fairview first released its proposal, residents have come forward with concerns over the height and density of the residential component of the project.

But both the residential and retail designs have changed since the company first released its plan in 2004.

A portion of the Don Mills Shopping Centre was supposed to be retained with some retail amenities available inside, along with some storefront retail. Plans to shut the mall completely were never in the cards. Those plans have changed, said Cadillac spokesman Neil Murphy. Now, all retail stores will be accessed from the outside, and in order to do so, the mall will have to be torn down.

"Our engineers looked at the building and we discovered we couldn't sustain it — it just wouldn't make sense," he said of the aging structure. "It would have cost us twice as much and took us twice as long to build."

The new mall will have the feel of Yorkville or Bloor West Village, said Murphy, but will be in keeping with Don Mills in an architectural sense. Ultimately, it will include 570,000 square feet of retail space and a 2.7-acre town square.

"There has been a tremendous amount of market research done and we have over 50 years experience in this community," he said. "We know what we're doing but we also know we can't please everyone."

Deals are in the process of being made with retailers, though Murphy wouldn't go into any detail. He said some would be coming back in the new mall but couldn't confirm which ones.

Some people in the community, which has the largest concentration of seniors in the city, are upset not just about losing their indoor mall, but also about not having access to retailers they've come to depend on during construction. Murphy said despite the accusations, changing it to an outdoor venue wasn't Cadillac Fairview's initial plan.

"People are under the impression we had this in the back of our minds all along, but that's not the case at all," he said, adding the company has been transparent from the beginning and has held several independent meetings with local ratepayer groups to discuss the plans.

Terry West, president of the Don Mills Residents Inc., a local ratepayer group, said while there is strong support for the mall among the community's younger residents, he wishes the company would have considered the objections of seniors.

"Certainly the community questions it — we live in a climate that has very hot summers and very cold winters," he said. "We're also concerned about pedestrian safety."

West said the current design puts pedestrian sections alongside local traffic, which could become a problem during busy mall times. He said the community also wants more green space and reassurances that some houses or streets won't have to look at the back alleyways of the mall.

While these issues will be debated further at the April community meeting, Murphy said

the company is already looking at ways to make the transition easier. Cadillac will provide a daily shuttle bus service to nearby Fairview Mall for the duration of the construction.

"The next 24 months are going to be downright inconvenient for folks around here and we get that," said Murphy. "We're going to make it as easy as possible and we appreciate everyone's patience."

The patience of the community has indeed been tried again and again over the past few years with respect to this project. While most residents agree the mall is in desperate need of a makeover, they don't like the idea of having a new compact housing complex that will include towering highrise buildings.

Murphy said Cadillac is going re-examine its residential plans and that most likely, it will be scaled back "a bit" from what it had initially proposed. Currently the plan is to build 1,500 units, with condos reaching up to 15 storeys. Murphy said the company will likely not be releasing those plans until sometime in 2007.

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