

Housing project expected to raise tempers

Women, mentally ill would benefit Downtown site to have 300 units

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DONOVAN VINCENT
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A proposal calling for a \$61 million affordable- and subsidized-housing development with 300 units is sure to draw the ire of downtown Toronto residents, Councillor Kyle Rae says.

"I'm expecting to hear (criticism) all the way through the process and to hear it when I'm knocking on doors during the election," Rae said of the project, which would be built in his ward.

The proposal calls for the YWCA and some partners to run a new facility at 110 Edward St., currently an 80-bed homeless shelter and housing referral centre near Dundas St. W. and University Ave.

Rae (Ward 27, Toronto Centre-Rosedale) strongly supports the plan, which calls for 100 subsidized units for single mothers with serious mental illnesses, 150 units of affordable housing for single women and single mothers, and 50 units for aboriginal singles, couples and families.

But he said he anticipates opposition from some people, who will view the project as simply "adding to the problems" of the city's downtown.

"The downtown problems are here and on the street," Rae said yesterday, adding the proposal is probably one of the most significant social-housing initiatives Toronto has seen since the province halted construction of such projects in 1995.

"People will assume that because (the project is) subsidized, or for people with mental illnesses or aboriginal people, it's a shelter. They won't see it as an apartment building," he said.

The project would require demolishing an existing building on the site and erecting two new ones, as well as renovating a heritage building that the YWCA wants to turn into its head office. The YWCA also wants the project to include a 200-seat auditorium/meeting room for use by the public.

The current shelter has been used to relocate homeless people who were sleeping at Nathan Phillips Square.

The proposal, which goes before the city's affordable housing committee next week, the policy and finance committee the following week, and council at the end of the month, is calling for demolition to begin next April, with occupancy in January 2009.

The cost of the project, if it gets the go-ahead, will be borne through mortgaging, rental income, and funding from the city, province, federal government and the YWCA.

The agency would have to launch a "significant fundraising campaign," spokeswoman Amanda Dale said yesterday.

Residents and business owners should keep an open mind to the proposal, Dale said.

"We are moving to permanent housing, which is generally an easier integration than a shelter is," she said.

The city bought the property in April. It was formerly a long-term-care facility, but the organization operating it was told it no longer met provincial standards, so it joined forces with a developer and put forward a plan calling for 300 units of condos, which city council approved.

But the condo deal fell through.

As the city tried to address its homeless problem, a lease agreement was signed allowing 110 Edward St. to be used as a winter emergency homeless shelter and referral centre, which opened in December 2004.

When the city was looking into building affordable housing, the site was found to be favourable since it had already been zoned for condos, Rae said.

In the meantime, the province said it is prepared to provide funding for 100 units for people dealing with mental-health issues, he said.

"That's a godsend for the city, given we know a significant number of homeless are dealing with mental-health and addiction issues."

The aboriginal housing aspect is also timely, since the city's recent homeless census found a disproportionate number of native people living on the streets, Rae added.

Aside from single mothers, young women having difficulty attending college or university because of expensive housing prices in Toronto could benefit from the project, the YWCA's Dale said.