

Eastern promises

City's revamp for Leslieville shows numbing influence of OMB

By Mike Smith

It's a good thing an Ontario Municipal Board hearing spurred a neighbourhood planning study for Leslieville. It's just too bad that now the city's gone and done a neighbourhood planning study for Leslieville that was clearly spurred by an OMB hearing.

The South of Eastern Secondary Plan for the Toronto Film Studio lands and area was presented to community council on Tuesday, January 15.

These lands constitute downtown's last intact "employment district," a highfalutin term for areas designated for industry. (Film studios are all that remain these days.) The plan delineates everything it should, with an obvious bias toward keeping out retail, especially of the gargantuan and corporate variety.

Any stores allowed would be small-scale. Developments should result in new sidewalks and internal streets. Live-work spaces are encouraged, and developments must meet green building standards. Planners have even indicated what the baseline for wages in the area should be. All in all, a much more sensible vision than a Wal-Mart. An eminently sensible document.

It's meant to be a raspberry to SmartCentres' OMB appeal of the city's big-box ban, and a signal to the OMB that the planning department is capable of managing its own zoning as well as staying up past 9, going potty by itself and whatever else the OMB forgets planners, being adults, can do. But one wonders why this plan has taken so long? There's little in it that's new.

District planner Denise Graham talks about specific projects she'd love to see: a new cycling route across the river, for example. But the report itself is painfully general, a sign of the numbing influence of the OMB on planning.

The difficulty of solving a neighbourhood's problems through a broad-stroke zoning plan was made clear at a residents' consultation of 200 at Morse Public School in Riverdale on Thursday, January 10.

Some spoke up in support of Wal-Mart, seeing no reason to turn away jobs. This friction emphasized a rift not easily effaced. More than half of local residents live below the poverty line. "I already can't get a job in my own neighbourhood because I don't have the qualifications," said one attendee. "If they put in a Wal-Mart, students and people without qualifications can get jobs."

Resident Tammy Hines echoed this feeling. "Our shops make our neighbourhood what it is," she said. But "I'm a single mom of three. I represent the other side. To shop within my means, I have to go elsewhere."

"Your plan will take 10 years," said Peter Crawford. "This [Smart Centres] proposal is real, this is now." A few other residents, both those opposed to the plan and those supporting it, repeated this concern: none of the city's plans have brought high-paying jobs in. Why should this one?

There's palpable frustration with the desolation of the area. In a way, it's maybe the strongest argument of all against Wal-Mart (or whatever SmartCentres plans); such companies feed on community stagnation and need a certain level of it to move in.

This suggests that the fight against big-box retail may begin well before zoning, with the creation of healthy communities, engaged and layered ones with the vitality to resist 'hood-busting consumer behemoths.

But there's little attempt in the city's plan to find a middle ground between IT-sector jobs and boutiques on the one hand and Wal-Mart on the other.

Architect Joe Lobko, in a somewhat controversial deputation at the community council, objected that the plan is motivated by "an almost tyrannical faith in the power of zoning."

Lobko believes focusing on zoning to the exclusion of other strategies is the problem itself – tantamount to a "religion" among planners, he says, who place great faith in the practice of separating uses. "But great cities, cities that work, they don't separate things. They mush them all together."

His alternative is to find a way the planners, the film community, the poor folk and the developers "could all be accommodated in great, flexible buildings." Planners try to balance mixed zoning within areas, while Lobko and others suggest more reliance on mixed use within buildings. "Do they really think they're going to get traditional industry along that little strip of land?" says Lobko. "It's not going to happen."

Not that councillors necessarily disagree. Kyle Rae bemoans the "conservatism" that has taken hold of the city when it comes to offering incentives like grants to specific industries.

And Gord Perks thinks there may be a way to attract traditionally industrial but small-scale outfits. "Toronto has a windmill, but when it breaks we order the parts from Denmark," he said. "We're trying to be a cycling city, but we have no bicycle assembly." He moved the site be prioritized for green economic development.

Still, there's not much time for dreaming. Planning feels the OMB breathing down its neck and lost its bid for a few more months to complete this study. Imagine if the planners said they needed time to experiment.