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BIG BOX BUSTING

THE ONLY WAY TO PUT THE KIBOSH ON WAL-MARTIZATION OF LESLIEVILLE IS TO APPROPRIATE OLD STUDIO LANDS

By MIKE SMITH

Stop me if you've heard this one.

Developer walks into a city, buys land where artists work. Says to the city, "I'd like to put overpriced housing and cookie-cutter retail here." City says, "Too bad." Developer appeals to the Ontario Municipal Board.

... Ba-dum-ching.

Yes, well. These things tend not to be terribly funny.

And now, with Queen West's OMB debacle still fresh in our memory (there, condos trumped the protests of residents, planners and soon-to-be-evicted artists), Queen East is bracing for its turn.

Despite proposals that were somewhere between a bad idea and napkin doodle being tossed around since 2004, when Rose Eastern Inc. asked for retail and residential zoning, no one knows exactly what's planned for the property on Eastern east of Leslie.

SmartCentres last year gained half-ownership of the lands that include the Toronto Film Studios. There's been no breakdown offered publicly, but whatever they want to build requires 1,900 parking spaces and includes at least one retail space of nearly 140,000 square feet.

A September OMB pre-hearing is set for the original appeal, but to quote city staff's report, "The city questioned whether this most recent proposal was a new application given the total change in the consultant team, new solicitor, new ownership interests and a new proposal, which has not been reviewed by the city or the community."

SmartCentres' high-priced lawyers will probably tie-up planning staff while petitioning the OMB on plans that might have happened, or might still. An assault on good taste.

Unsurprisingly, Councillor Paula Fletcher is livid.

"They want a blank cheque," she says.

Toronto priorities on the environment and creative industry make the big-box retail malls SmartCentres builds a non-starter.

The province, on paper, agrees. Its revised Places To Grow: Growth Plan For The Greater Golden Horseshoe advises that large-scale retail shouldn't count as viable employment.

"The province and the city are on the same page now," says Fletcher. "That's historic."

Many precedents could be set.

When the matter came up at the last Toronto community council, Councillor Adam Vaughan moved that staff look into drafting a bylaw to set maximum development densities – in other words, prohibiting giant box stores, but also potentially creating a tool the city could use to force developers to make at-grade retail in new condo towers accessible to independent merchants.

Friends of the Studio District is pushing for council to oppose any rezoning, period, which the group says would threaten one of the few serious studio spaces still available to low-budget productions and independent filmmakers.

"If our councillors' mandate had always been to maintain employment lands, this never would have happened," says Friends' Suzanne McCormick.

McCormick, a photographer, says those attached directly and indirectly to the film industry are an integral part of the local economy – and the city's spirit.

"Artists, with their insight and approach, bring so much to the city."

They and sister group Friends of Leslieville (FOL) have proposed that the city, working with new buddies the province, look into appropriating the land and tying it into municipal waterfront plans.

Environmental lawyer David Donnelly, who works with FOL, says that if council could appropriate land for Dundas Square, it can certainly do it on this site.

"It would give this a higher public purpose," he tells me.

Fletcher won't rule this out, but says it's early days yet. Seems like a good place to start for a city in dire need of a line in the sand marking local control over city planning. ☺

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