

Heavy hitters call for end to waterfront retail plan

David Crombie among those asking province to step in

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Community opponents of SmartCentre's plans to build a 700,000-square-foot retail development on Eastern Avenue got some influential allies this week, as former Toronto mayor David Crombie, and prominent architects Ken Greenberg, Jack Diamond and Daniel Libeskind joined together to urge the provincial government to quash the proposal.

"In the way this is playing out, what we're seeing is a tragedy in the making with potentially a terrible planning decision that would result in a seven-hectare totally suburban big box centre anchored by a WalMart," said Greenberg at a Thursday morning news conference in Toronto City Hall. "It's not difficult to imagine this entire stretch turning into the proverbial suburban mall strip, with a total denial of almost everything the city has worked for for two decades."

Greenberg was joined by former mayor Crombie at the news conference organized by the East Toronto Community Coalition. The group has been fighting the proposal for the redevelopment of the Toronto Film Studio lands on Eastern Avenue at the Ontario Municipal Board, and is gearing up for the hearing's start May 20.

But a key part of their strategy is to have the decision-making power taken away from the Ontario Municipal Board, and the final verdict on the SmartCentres proposal rendered in the provincial cabinet. And for that to happen, the Ontario government must declare a provincial interest in the lands.

Greenberg and Crombie both argued that declaring such an interest wouldn't be a stretch.

"One of the reasons this makes enormous sense is that on the south side of Lakeshore Boulevard, you have Waterfront Toronto, which is an agency created by the federal government, the province and the city to oversee the revitalization of the thousand-acre portlands," said Greenberg. "There's a violent collision of these two visions for the future. The province is involved in what's happening on the south side of the street, but you can't clap with one hand. You can't have one side of the street trying to do one thing and the other side rapidly turning into something else."

Crombie pointed out that in the past, developments before the Ontario Municipal Board could routinely be appealed to cabinet. This time, he said, the development needs provincial approval.

"I have no doubt in my mind that if the province wants to pursue its own policies, that they have a provincial interest - not just in this specific piece but in this waterfront," he said. "We didn't take down the Gardiner Expressway to provide for a suburban big box retail. That was not its purpose. Its purpose was to create a unique place on the waterfront where people could live, work and play. That's still the dream - that's still what Torontonians have been promised, and they deserve no less."

Both Crombie and Greenberg bring significant credibility to the case. Greenberg is the former director of design and architecture and a partner in Urban Strategies Inc. Crombie was Toronto's reform-minded mayor in the early 1970s, a former Progressive Conservative MP, and a frequent adviser on urban issues.

Showing support with letters if not their presence were Daniel Libeskind - the architect of the

redesigned World Trade Centre in New York City and the Royal Ontario Museum's Michael Lee-Chin Crystal - and architect Jack Diamond.

East Toronto Community Coalition spokesperson Kelly Carmichael said she hoped that the prominent support would help convince Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Watson to declare a provincial interest.

"My message to the province is hopefully they will step in and stand up for their policies," she said. "The community has a vision of what they want down there and it is not another barrier to the waterfront."