



Decision on Eastern Ave. mall will shape city

April 04, 2008

CHRISTOPHER HUME

It's clear now that the future of Eastern Ave. is the future of Toronto.

This is the battleground where the forces of big-box retail and corporate development will go head-to-head with the city itself.

Urban or suburban, that is the question that must be answered. And who gets to decide? No other challenge faced by the city has greater implications. This is where we will make it clear who we are, who we want to be, and what kind of city we think Toronto should be.

That's why a proposal from SmartCentres to build a huge shopping mall at Eastern and Leslie St. with parking for 1,900 cars has become so contentious.

People are lining up to voice their opposition. Architects, former mayors, local residents, councillors and the mayor himself, David Miller, have denounced the project.

As well they should; it has no place in Toronto. It was ex-mayor David Crombie who pointed out that we didn't go through the pain and expense of taking down the east end of the Gardiner Expressway just to make room for Wal-Mart and its ilk.

The promoters would tell us that this is not just another suburban mall, that it's "architectural," that the parking has been "hidden," and therefore, that it's urban.

A mall by another other name would smell just as bad, and be just as inappropriate. No surprise Toronto City Council rejected the plan in 2004. The land in question is zoned for employment, which doesn't include retail outlets.

But SmartCentres appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board, which agreed to hear its case. Then the board decided that a second site next door could be added to the ruling. If the one gets approved, so does the other.

The OMB will hear the case in May, which means the two sides are preparing their arguments now. Lawyers are lining up their experts, who will testify on cue.

"Going to the OMB has become an industry for lawyers and planning consultants," says Toronto's former chief planner, Paul Bedford. "It's part of the suburbanization of Toronto.

What's happening on Eastern Ave. is all being done for the benefit of car people, but the city's about foot people."

Little wonder then that there's such shock over the contempt for the city shown by the proposal *and* the OMB's response to it. After modest gains on the urban file under Premier Dalton McGuinty – City of Toronto Act, the Planning Act – Torontonians were rudely reminded of how powerless they are. In the end, these decisions will be made by that remnant of 19th-century paternalism, the OMB.

But for its fear of action, the province would have abolished the board long ago. In the 21st century, there is no place for a body that's unelected, unaccountable and unwanted. Everything about it offends; its very existence smacks of frock coats, top hats and public hangings.

Except for lawyers, we all have better things to do with the time, energy and money we devote to battles like this. The city – and the province – would be much better off not having to fight endless rearguard actions such as this.

Some weeks ago Miller wrote a letter to Ontario Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Watson, asking him to declare a provincial interest in the matter. That would allow the province to overrule the board. A spokesperson for Watson will say only that the minister can't comment because the issue is before the OMB. How limp is that?

That's why so many are so concerned about Eastern Ave. What happens there could happen anywhere.

Christopher Hume can be reached at chume@thestar.ca