

# B.M.R. COMMENT



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## REDEVELOPMENT AND OPEN SPACE

Urban redevelopment raises many critical issues. It can solve old problems; or it can compound old problems while creating new ones. In this COMMENT, we discuss some of these general issues as they arise in a particular case, the new proposal for St. James Town West.

### The Proposed Development

On March 2, 1971 the City of Toronto Planning Board passed a recommendation that a site plan by-law be enacted that would allow Howard Investments (part of the Meridian Group) to develop the 4.8 acre site known as "St. James Town West" (stretching from Wellesley Street to south of Howard Street between Sherbourne and Bleeker Streets), as a residential-commercial complex, subject to the following provisions:

- (a) Restriction of total gross floor area to 4.375 times the area of the lot prior to conveyances for highway purposes.
- (b) That not less than 67% landscaped open space be provided and maintained, which total may include roof areas of the building not more than 45 feet above grade.
- (c) That all parking be provided underground, to the full requirements of the Zoning By-Law, except that there shall be no requirement to designate separate visitor parking facilities.

Further recommendations were passed regarding permission to operate commercial underground parking for a year; conveyance to the City of lands (a 10 foot wide strip along the Sherbourne frontage; a 16 foot wide strip along the Bleeker frontage; a 66 foot wide road allowance between Bleeker and Sherbourne opposite Earl Street; and a triangular parcel at the north-west corner of Parliament and Wellesley Streets) at nominal cost for dedication as a public highway; the construction and maintenance by the developer of the road between Sherbourne and Bleeker; and approval by the Commissioner of Public Works of the widening of Bleeker and Howard Streets and of the removal of certain one-way regulations on Bleeker and Howard Streets.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Report on Application for an Amendment to the Zoning By-Law to Permit A Residential/Commercial Complex Between Sherbourne/Bleeker Streets South of Howard Street - "St. James Town West", pp.17-19.

In making these particular recommendations, the City Planning Board made two major changes from the recommendations in the report drawn up by the City's planning staff. Both changes concern the density allowable on this site. The staff report shows:

- (1) that although the developer's application is avowedly for the maximum density of 4.375, according to planning staff calculations, it is in fact for 4.881; and
- (2) that under the present bonus system, the project - as presently designed - earns a residential density of only 3.58 and a combined residential-commercial density of 3.8.<sup>2</sup>

The staff recommendation, therefore, was that the residential density for this project be restricted to 3.58 and the residential-commercial density to 3.8. The Planning Board, however, granted the 4.375 density asked by the developer. The Board made no changes in the way the developer calculated the 4.375. Indeed, in order to grant the full bonus, they chose to count the lands to be conveyed by the developer to the City for streets as "landscaped open space".

The City Planning Board has given its approval to a large new development - St. James Town West - which is located just west of another large development, St. James Town. The project, as proposed by the developer will consist of limited retail, commercial and office space and three residential towers (two of 31 stories and one of 30 stories), connected by a podium raised one story off the ground.

Because the project asks for a density above that allowed by the present Zoning By-law, it requires an amendment to the Zoning By-law. Such an amendment must pass through several stages of approval. The proposed St. James Town West development has cleared the first hurdle - the City Planning Board. It must still be considered and approved by the City of Toronto Buildings and Development Committee, the City Council and the Ontario Municipal Board.

### Issues

The decision of the City Planning Board to count streets as "landscaped open space" in order to grant the maximum bonus - and the very nature of the development itself - both raise many issues which are critical for the future of Toronto, and for any other rapidly developing city. What constitutes the "efficient and enjoyable place in which to live" that is desired by City Council (Official Plan, Section 1.3(b), p.1)? What type of development does the City want? What strength does the Official Plan really have? What obligations does the developer have to the people already living in the area - particularly in a case like this one where these people are living in an en-

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<sup>2</sup>"4.375 density" means that the developer can build a building which has a gross floor area 4.375 times the size of the lot.

"bonus system"-The City has a residential bonus system which grants increases in the density above those allowed by the Zoning By-Law in order "to encourage a high standard of development". (Official Plan, S.2.9c(i)). Bonuses are granted for such things as landscaped open space, size of the site, mixed development, adjoining frontages, underground parking. The bonus system is currently under review.

vironment created by the same developer who is now proposing expansion? Is the proposed mix of dwelling units (278 monettes, 184 bachelors, 240 1-bedroom, 368 2-bedrooms, and only 60 3-bedrooms) the right one for the City or the area? What constitutes "landscaped open space"? What is the purpose of the bonus system? To what extent should traffic needs be filled at the expense of park and open space needs?

Obviously the Bureau alone cannot define "an enjoyable place in which to live", or determine the type of development desired, or speak for the present residents who claim that their needs are not being served. But, because we have been conducting research on open space in Toronto, we can, in this COMMENT, discuss the proposed development in terms of its effect on parks and open space.

### Parks and the Official Plan

The Official Plan of the City of Toronto states clearly:

- (1) that "in passing by-laws which permit high density residential use Council will have regard, among other matters, for the following:-(i) the adequacy of municipal services, parks and playgrounds and of planned improvements thereof" (S.2.9 (e) (i), p. 10); and
- (2) that "the policy of Council in acquiring lands for district and local parks is directed to obtaining:- (i) 1.4 acres per 1,000 population for all persons whose place of residence is more than 1/4 mile walking distance from a regional park; and (ii) local parks at a distance of not greater than 1/4 mile for all persons whose place of residence is not within 1/4 mile walking distance of a regional park".(S.2.12 (a) (i) and (ii), p.12).

In short, Council has stated that high density residential developments must be adequately served by parks, and has defined such adequacy as 1.4 acres per 1,000 population within 1/4 mile walking distance of any residence not within 1/4 mile walking distance of a regional park.

Whether or not this is a good standard is not the issue here. The issue we are discussing is: how well does the proposed St. James Town West project comply with these Official Plan policies?

Stated simply, it doesn't. Neither St. James Town nor St. James Town West is within 1/4 mile walking distance of any park - regional, district or local. The nearest publicly-owned, undeveloped land is the Rosedale Valley Road land which, for reasons given below, we do not consider to be a park. By any standard, the St. James Town area is already very inadequately served. There are no local parks within a 1/4 mile of the present 12,000 to 15,000 people living there and the addition of 2,000 more people can only make the situation worse.

The planning staff report on the St. James Town West development includes a report by the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation which

concludes that:

"From a parks standpoint the area of the proposed development meets with the desirable parks standards set forth in Part 1 of the Official City Plan insofar as existing and planned facilities are concerned." (p.14)

We respectfully disagree. If the policies of the Official Plan were being followed, there would already be some 16.8 to 21.0 acres of local parkland within a 1/4 mile walking distance of the present 12,000 to 15,000 people and there would be an additional 2.8 acres for the new development, raising the total to some 19.6 to 23.8 acres. There are none at present.

In support of his conclusion, the Commissioner listed 4 district parks (Moss Park, Riverdale Park, Ramsden Park, and Rosedale Park) which are less than a mile walking distance away from the proposed development. None are within 1/4 mile (the nearest being Moss Park, 1/2 - 3/4 mile away) and, we submit, these district parks are much too far away to serve the St. James Town developments. To support our statement, we include a table based on interviews which we conducted in 12 City park locations last summer. We conducted two types of interviews - one lengthy (A) and one brief (B). Interview A sought much detailed information about the interviewee and his use of the park. Interview B sought less detailed information and hence tapped a more mobile group of users. (This explains the percentage differences between the two groups). But both interviews asked the same questions about walking distance and, therefore, we have included the results of both. The interviews were conducted in all types of parks - local, district and regional. If they had been conducted only in local parks, there would have been even greater emphasis on the shorter distances.

WALKING DISTANCE TO PARKS

	less than 1/8 mi.	1/8 mi. to 1/4 mi.	1/4 mi. to 1/2 mi.	1/2 mi. to 3/4 mi.	3/4 mi. to 1 mile	more than 1 mile	No Answer	Total
<u>Interview A</u>								
# of Respondents	49	21	43	8	10	17	12	160
% of Respondents	31%	13%	27%	5%	6%	11%	8%	
Cumulative %	31%	44%	71%	76%	82%	93%	100%+	
<u>Interview B</u>								
# of Respondents	25	24	15	6	3	4	0	77
% of Respondents	33%	31%	20%	8%	4%	5%	0	
Cumulative %	33%	64%	84%	92%	96%	100%+		

The table shows clearly that few people will walk more than 1/2 a mile, let alone a mile, to go to a park. 31% of those interviewed in A walked less than 1/8 mile, as did 33% of those interviewed in B; 44% of A walked

less than 1/4 mile, as did 64% of B; while only 6% of A and 5% of B walked between 3/4 and 1 mile; and only 11% of A and 5% of B walked more than a mile

The Commissioner also listed the Rosedale Valley Road lands, which are not at present developed as parks in the St. James Town area. While being less than 1/4 mile from St. James Town, they are virtually inaccessible on foot. Indeed, in the St. James Town area, the lands consist of a busy roadway running between steep valley sides. The nearest sitting out areas where the valley widens into a recognizable park, are near Bloor and Yonge (Park Road), which is more than a 1/4 mile away. If the Rosedale Valley Road land could be made more accessible, that would help the present deficiency but would not fill it.

Finally, the Commissioner mentioned that Council has approved in principle two small parkettes within 300 feet of the development. Unfortunately, approval in principle alone is not enough to create a parkette. Approval was given in 1965 and, although there has been considerable land acquisition and change in the area since that time, neither of these parkettes has been acquired. Unless swift action is taken by Council, we cannot be sure that they will be acquired in time for the new development.

In sum, it seems clear that the Official Plan policies regarding parks are not being carried out in the St. James Town area. In considering this development proposal, Council must regard it in the light of the Official Plan. It is a clear test of the real strength of that plan.

#### Landscaped Open Space

By considering the 20% of the site which is to be conveyed for public highways as "landscaped open space" in order to award the maximum bonus, the Planning Board has raised another open space issue.

What is landscaped open space? In this COMMENT, we are not discussing whether or not landscaped open space should receive a bonus, or what type of landscaped open space should receive a bonus. We are simply applying the present definitions to this development. According to the general provisions of the City of Toronto Zoning By-Law, landscaped open space is "open unobstructed space on a lot which is suitable for the growth and maintenance of grass, flowers, bushes and other landscaping", including paved walkway and patio areas and recreation areas; and not including "any driveway or ramp, whether surfaced or not, any curb, retaining wall, motor vehicle parking area or any open space beneath or within any building or structure." (p.28)

The present bonus system awards a bonus of an additional 0.04 density (up to a maximum density of 4.375 in the area we are discussing) for each 1% of landscaped open space provided above the 65% minimum bonus requirement. Therefore, by counting the 20% of the site to be used for roads as landscaped open space, the Planning Board was able to award the maximum bonus

Council, of course, does not have to follow the zoning definition given above. It has the authority to pass a by-law defining "landscaped

open space" as it wishes. However, the passing of a by-law saying that streets are landscaped open space does not in fact make those streets landscaped open space. They are still simply paved areas for cars.

This is not the first time that streets have been counted as landscaped open space; but the practice should surely now be re-examined. If the City wishes to award a bonus for giving land for streets, it should create such a bonus. But it should not stretch the definition of landscaped open space just to allow bonuses to be granted. Among other harmful effects this practice would tend to disguise the extent of the need for genuine "open space".

### Streets and Parks

One final open space issue raised by this development is: to what extent should traffic needs be filled at the expense of park and open space needs? We have already shown that the St. James Town area is very short of parks. The proposed raised podium, which constitutes the bulk of "landscaped open space" on this site and which will have minimal public access, will do little to alleviate the present shortage. But the Commissioner of Public Works made a case that the area is also suffering from traffic congestion. Consequently, according to the proposal, one fifth of the development site will be made into roads; several other roads in the area are slated for widening; and a triangular parcel of land at the northwest corner of Parliament and Wellesley will also be used for a road. At present this triangular parcel of land consists of a pleasant sitting area around a picturesque fountain, which was created by the developer and has been much appreciated, not only by residents of St. James Town, but also by residents of the wider community. It would be regrettable if this pleasant oasis were to fall victim to a road expansion. Requests for road expansion should also be re-examined in the light of the park shortage discussed earlier.

Urban redevelopment clearly raises many critical issues. We hope that our comments on open space will help in the discussion of this and future redevelopment proposals.