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Wesley Mimico United Church / Wesley Mimico Place

Presentation by Harry Oussoren, President WMP and member of the WMUC Council

at Etobicoke York Community Council (Application # 13 143167 WET 06 OZ) - June 14, 2016

**Re: the Repeal of the City of Toronto's Redevelopment Zoning By-Law No. 379-2015 (2 April 2015)
finally confirmed May 9, 2015**

Greetings Councillors, my name is Harry Oussoren. I am a member of Wesley Mimico United Church and serve on its Council and I also chair the Board of Wesley Mimico Place – the community-based, non-profit corporation specifically created to undertake the renewal of Wesley Mimico Church at 2 Station Road. **I come neither to support nor oppose the repeal of this Zoning By-Law**, but to provide you context as you consider this proposal put before you by City staff.

Like many faith communities, Wesley United Church - an active presence in the Mimico Lakeshore area over 155 years - understood its need to begin the process of re-thinking its future. So, led by the Faith & Hope Team, the congregation decided to take stock of its situation. It found

- a weary, inaccessible, inefficient but cherished building designed for another era, but with great value - both architectural and social - a place for people to gather in the centre of Mimico;

- a community with an exploding population base, a significant resident population of low income people – mainly tenants, and an aging population of home owners hoping to continue living in the Lakeshore.

The congregation felt strongly that “God continues to call us to be a congregational presence in the Mimico Lakeshore community” and that there is a mission to carry out – esp. in partnership with other faith and Lakeshore groups, organizations, and neighbours. “As a congregation we trusted and continue to trust in God’s faithfulness however our hopes, dreams, and plans evolve.”

After carefully weighing factors and holding open community meetings with Lakeshore residents and leaders, the Faith & Hope Team presented alternatives. **The congregation with one voice chose from 4 options to repurpose, renew and add to the current facility to better serve our community.** This choice involved three goals:

- 30 owner-occupied, independent living suites for seniors over 55;
- multi-purpose space for the congregation to worship, offer its community meals and foodbank and other programs, and
- space to accommodate community groups and services working in partnership with the congregation to meet community needs.

This was a balanced approach that respected both the architectural and social heritage of the property and would allow Wesley to continue as a centre for community. In effect the congregation was willing to risk its life to embrace a new future for itself and for the Lakeshore area. It gained the support of the larger church, the resounding encouragement of resident neighbours, and sought the City's approval for the project.

By April 2013 our rezoning application was deemed "complete"; further work resulted in a public meeting which confirmed the overwhelming support of community residents for the project. The City decided to pursue heritage designation for the building. This was finally declared at the end of July 2014 – two years after the congregation's decision. We were grateful to the Etobicoke York Community Preservation Panel and community voices urging acceptance of the Wesley plan and the approval of the Toronto Preservation Board of our plan as a reasonable way to accommodate both architectural and social heritage values.

The final step in approving the Rezoning By-Law took place on May 9, 2015, finally launching the marketing campaign to purchase suites.

This heritage designation led to many protracted meetings to gain approval from Heritage staff for adapting and adding to the building and yet more meetings with planning and urban design staff to integrate heritage requirements with zoning and unclear design requirements. Heritage architects had to be retained to meet these requirements and develop a (architectural) heritage conservation plan. We estimate that about \$1 million of the \$17 million plan had to be budgeted for heritage concerns. Heritage designs required shrinking the number of housing units, further stressing the budget. None of this cost, of course, would be funded by either the City or by the Province of Ontario which mandates the Heritage Act.

We want to acknowledge that city staff members were generally patient and gracious with our team as they sought to carry out their legislative mandates concerning zoning, urban design and heritage matters. We are grateful to several City councillors who advised and supported us along the way. We lament that, throughout this long process, our Ward Councillor Mark Grimes was unable or unwilling to meet with our team to understand our hopes or to give advice for achieving our goals, even when specifically invited or when we hosted 13 community meetings.

We experienced and now lament the fact that non-profit, community-based groups – without deep pockets and with little political clout - can often be severely handicapped in the City's complex and costly processes. This is a matter of great concern, given the number of churches and other religious buildings, plus Legions, service clubs, and ethnic community halls ripe for renewal. The complexity, the delays, the uneven counsel, and the high costs of the development process - present major obstacles for such local groups to venture into renewal projects to better serve neighbourhoods. Beside this, City development fees and related costs added an additional \$800,000 to Wesley's capital costs.

Hence we offer two suggestions that come from learnings in dealing with the City's penchant for complexity, delay, and cost:

- First, we would urge City Council to **develop policies to encourage non-profit redevelopment projects** that contribute to the health of the City and **to establish an advocacy office to support community non-profit organizations in their quest to repurpose properties**. The City would be well-served if more non-profit, affordable redevelopments were encouraged in their desire to serve the City's residents and communities.
- Second, **we would encourage greater fairness in the area of City-mandated costs**. The Wesley development involved a Section 37 agreement with the City which required an architectural heritage conservation plan to be implemented. Overall, the heritage budget totalled \$1 million. Beside this, the project dedicated the entire ground floor to community use – the sanctuary/hall and kitchen for community meetings, meals, meetings, performances and events; and community meeting space including provision for a LAMP mental health program, food bank, and Etobicoke Service for Seniors and Store Front Humber seniors services. This community space benefit had a value of about \$3 million in our capital budget.

So Wesley's social and architectural heritage renewal plan involved a combined "community benefits" total of about \$4 million on a \$17 million project.

Compare this to the section 37 contributions the for-profit-developers have paid and are paying for major highly profitable increases in height and density of their proposed developments in our area. Proportionately Wesley's contribution to the community by far exceeded the contributions of for-profit developments. **A review of the whole Section 37 system is overdue to ensure greater transparency in the collection and distribution of these funds and to ensure non-profits are not penalized while for-profit developers reap huge financial benefits.**

As you deal with the staff proposal to repeal the 2 Station Road rezoning by-law, I urge you to consider at least these two recommendations as two key learnings from this innovative and ambitious renewal project. //

On January 14 of this year the Board of WMP determined that we were not able to meet the conditions that would allow us to collect the City's building permit waiting for us to start construction. The financial gap between projected revenue and costs was simply too large. As you can imagine, there was great sadness as we came to that conclusion. **The feedback from the congregation, community residents and partner groups, and friends near and far spoke movingly about this loss of a valuable resource to the Lakeshore** - in large measure because the City did not give effective support to the community's efforts to develop it. (An invoice for \$611 to send notices of the City's intent to repeal this rezoning rubbed salt into the congregation's wounds.)

As a postscript, we can report that **the congregation has now sold the Wesley property with the closing set for early in July**. We are hopeful that some aspects of both the architectural and social heritage will be conserved through this sale. Meanwhile the Wesley congregation is reviewing its options but with the conviction that God continues to call this small but vibrant faith community to be present and actively engaged in the health and well-being of the Lakeshore community and the City as a whole.

Thank you for this time and your interest in the Wesley Mimico United Church congregation and project.