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Developer pitches twin towers for Halifax's Robie Street, concerned group counters

Francis Campbell (fcampbell@herald.ca)
(mailto:fcampbell@herald.ca)

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An artist's rendering of a proposed development at Spring Garden Road and Robie Street. - Contributed

A twin-tower development proposed for the Halifax block of Robie, College and Carlton streets is ruffling heritage feathers.

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"Over 50 per cent of the buildings (in that area) are heritage protected," said Peggy Cameron, co-chairwoman of the Friends of Halifax Common. "Another 11 have been identified as potential, or what would qualify as, heritage buildings. The city has never worked on that request, they've only worked on what the developers want."

Kassner Goodspeed Architects and a numbered-company developer took their proposal for a mixed-use building that would comprise approximately 400 residential units to the Halifax peninsula planning advisory committee earlier this week. The proposal is for 32,000 square feet of ground-level commercial space in a building that would feature 26- and 20-storey towers along a property that would encompass two Robie Street addresses, along with seven College Street and two Carlton Street addresses.

"Most of the comments at the committee meeting were around the mapping, the density that would be added to the neighbourhood," said Coun. Lindell Smith, who represents Halifax Peninsula North on regional council and sits on both the planning advisory committee and the Halifax and west community council.

Smith said the block is a prime corner but said the question arises about too much density, especially with a Drexel Developments project slated for the same block. That proposal for the Spring Garden Road side consists of two towers of 30 and 16 storeys with 250 residential units and 60,000 square feet of office space and 21,000 square feet of ground floor retail space. In August, the peninsula planning committee recommended that the Halifax and west community council approve the development with lowered tower heights of 16 to 20 storeys to conform to the municipal Centre Plan, still in its own development stage.

The Robie, College and Carlton application would require amendments to the municipal planning strategy and land-use bylaw. The applicant has proposed substantial alterations to three registered municipal heritage properties, including moving two of them, one from 5969 College St., to a nearby College location in the near yards of two other municipal heritage properties.

Proposed alterations to heritage properties upset Cameron, who says requests in 2012 and 2016 from her group to establish an area conservation district in that area have been ignored by the city.

Cameron said that Howard Epstein, a former city councillor and former MLA, sent a letter to Mayor Mike Savage in August inquiring about the requests for a conservation district but received no reply.

"Proposals for the towers shouldn't be proceeding until those requests are considered," Cameron said. "All of this evidence that this is an historic neighbourhood and it should be a heritage conservation district has been ignored because a couple of developers have been playing monopoly on the block and they are going to spend a lot of money to be able to railroad through all the rules. That's the only reason that block has ever been considered as a targeted growth area under the Centre Plan is that two developers want to do developments there. It hasn't got anything to do with demonstrated need or even capacity."

Cameron said an already approved 18-storey highrise to be developed by Killam Properties next to the Camp Hill Cemetery on Carlton Street will satisfy the bulk of HRM's growth target of 400 additional residents for the area.

Smith said he can understand frustrations with amending existing bylaws and strategies.

"There are definitely two arguments," Smith said. "It seems like developers are always coming and looking for changes to the bylaws, it seems to happen a lot and can be concerning for areas that are used to one type of use. The other side of the problem is that most of these land-use bylaws are 50 years old. Areas have changed and have grown.

"It's a balancing act. The Centre Plan will hopefully help us get away from applicants coming in looking for these amendments."

The twin-tower proposal will now move on to the heritage advisory committee. Vice-chairwoman Jenny Lugar said Wednesday that the committee could consider both the twin towers and the Drexel proposals at meetings in October and November.

The proposal from the numbered-company developer will also go to Halifax and west community council for consideration, which will include a public hearing.

With recommendations from both the heritage committee and community council, the proposal will eventually be presented to regional council for a decision.

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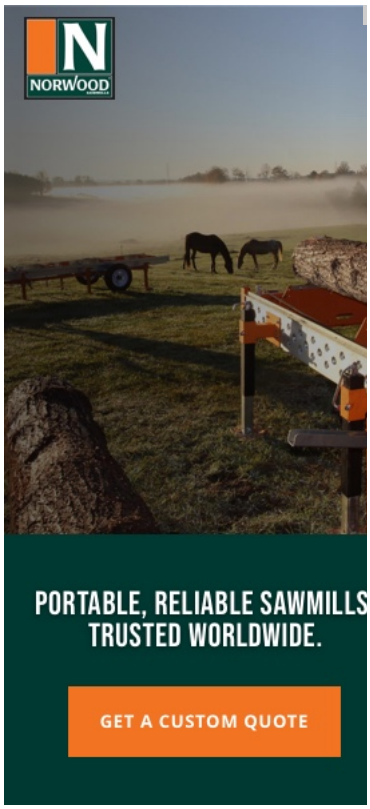

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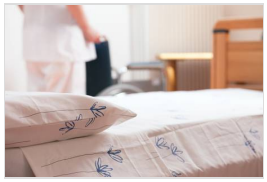

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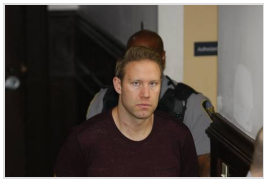

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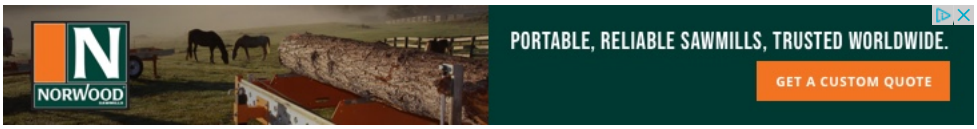

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