

Packed house for casino meeting in Pickering

Pickering News Advertiser

PICKERING -- More than 100 people packed Pickering City Hall Monday night to learn more about an ambitious tourism proposal that could include a casino.

On April 7, council's planning and development committee held a statutory public meeting on an application from Pickering Developments Inc. to re-zone three pieces of land near Bayly Street and Church Street.

Steve Apostolopoulos, co-founder and managing partner of Pickering Developments Inc., said the \$1.6 billion Durham Live project could include everything from upscale hotels and a water park, to a film studio and casino.

"It will be a landmark tourism site for the city, the region and the GTA as a whole," said Emma West from Planning Alliance, an urban planning and design firm working on the project.

She told the committee the vision for Durham Live is a "compact and urban walkable tourist destination" with the potential for significant job creation and economic spin-offs.

For example, Ms. West said a re-zoned tourist area could potentially create 350 jobs per hectare, or between 11,000 and 15,000 jobs in total.

That's compared with an estimate of 27 jobs per hectare with the land's current zoning for light industrial and manufacturing uses.

Ms. West also noted Durham currently gets about three million tourist visits per year, most of which are people here to visit family and friends. She said the Durham Live development could draw 14 million visitors a year.

"We have looked at the compatibility of the surrounding uses and we believe that this is compatible with these uses," she said.

Residents who attended the meeting had a range of opinions on the proposal.



PICKERING -- Emma West made a presentation, representing Steve Apostolopoulos, of Pickering Developments Inc., at the City of Pickering's public meeting on a proposal to re-zone three pieces of land in Pickering to create a huge tourist destination called DurhamLive. April 7, 2014



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One emphatic voice of opposition came from Bob Broadstock, president of Quarter Racing Owners of Ontario Inc.

He said a new casino in Pickering would close the Ajax Downs facility and “cease horse racing entirely,” which would result in a loss of “countless” jobs.

Also opposed was resident Pam Leggett, who lives a few kilometres from the proposed site and is concerned about traffic congestion.

“It’s already hard to get around Pickering at certain times of the day...this will attract thousands of people and make the traffic much worse,” she said.

Resident David Sim supports the Durham Live proposal, because he and his wife usually have to travel to attend shows and attractions.

“What a joy it would be to have a complex like that on Bayly, I hope it goes ahead,” he told committee.

Dianne McLean was also in favour, saying the revenue from a casino could help lessen the burden on taxpayers.

“If there’s a way for the City to have an extra \$5 million or \$6 million a year, think of how much that could help with our taxes,” she said. “How could we say no to something like that?”

The lands in question total about 90 hectares and are bounded by Hwy. 401 and GO Transit rail to the north, Church Street to the east, Bayly Street to the south and CN Rail tracks to the west.

The land is currently vacant and is zoned to allow manufacturing, storage and industrial uses. Since there is no zoning category that allows for all the proposed uses, the intent is to create a site-specific zoning category called “tourist destination.”

Pickering Developments Inc. wants to re-zone the entire site, but is seeking to have approval of the amendment done in two phases.

Ms. West explained that the line dividing the two phases is intended to separate lands that don’t have constraints due to natural features, from those that will require a more a more detailed environmental impact study.

City staff are currently reviewing a stack of reports including noise studies, traffic studies, an environmental site assessment, urban transportation study and planning rationale report.

“We are looking at whether the proposed development is compatible and sensitive to its surrounding uses,” noted Ross Pym, a principal planner with the City of Pickering.

The committee did not make any decisions about the Durham Live proposal on April 7.

City staff are expected to go back to council with a report and recommendation in the summer.

OLG MODERNIZATION PLAN MEANS ONLY ONE CASINO PER GAMING ZONE

The OLG has announced a modernization plan that groups GTA municipalities into gaming zones -- including one zone for Ajax, Pickering and Whitby.

There can only be one casino in each zone, which means approval of a casino in Pickering would result in the closing of Ajax Downs.

Ajax Mayor Steve Parish has said he's not worried about that happening.

"The Ajax site is one of the most successful in the province," he said in an interview. "When you go down the list and tick off the boxes, Ajax has it. The Province has made it clear, to move it off site, there has to be a strong business case. Pickering doesn't have one."

The Town of Ajax received about \$6.9 million in revenue from Ajax Downs in 2012.

In response to the OLG changes, Whitby declared itself a willing host for a casino in September 2012 and started negotiations with Ajax to receive a share of the Ajax Downs revenue, in exchange for not pursuing a gaming facility of its own.

Whitby ultimately rejected an offer of an annual 15-per cent share, or about \$1 million.

In December 2012, Pickering council voted 4-3 to declare the city a willing host for gaming facility.