

Sewell on City Hall:

Before community groups start raising thousands to fight developers, consider these simple steps.

BY JOHN SEWELL

October 2016

Community groups are rightly flummoxed when a development they are opposed to is pushed to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) for a decision.

Should the group start raising \$20,000 or more to retain a lawyer to fight on its behalf? Is there any chance the board will be influenced by community concerns? Does it matter what city planners say about the development? Can the group win at the OMB?

I'm often approached by groups facing these questions, and my advice is that it's difficult to create enough sympathy to raise the money and retain a lawyer. In any case, having a lawyer at the hearing on its own rarely gives a group much chance for success.

And it seems not to matter much if the city planners happen to align with the community's concerns: more often than not the OMB decides city planning is in such a mess that it would be unfair not to give the developer what it wants.

Can the group do anything other than roll over and play dead?

In some cases, it is clear that opposition will never be effective. I am thinking here of the mammoth towers planned up and down Yonge Street — four or five dozen towers more than 30 storeys high are planned from Eglinton to the waterfront within a block on either side of Yonge. Opposing these is mostly futile. But there are other cases involving development along main streets or close to settled neighbourhoods where groups can be effective.

What's required is that the group change its strategy from being opposed to something and instead deciding what it would be in favour of. My experience is that this shift in perspective isn't always easy, but it can be done and is often refreshing.

The key is to think in terms of building form that would be acceptable, not in terms of abstract numbers. What would a nice building on the development site look like? How high, how close to the street, what would the face of the building look like?

The most comfortable buildings to walk beside are structures about four stories high, with active shops and restaurants lining the sidewalk and a pleasant facade. Buildings that rise straight up from the ground more than four or five stories are generally intimidating, and tall buildings are mostly boring at the street level, with either empty lobbies or vacant banking spaces. Buildings covered in reflective glass aren't very nice on a street.

Looking at the building from the point of view of a pedestrian is a good place to start and

determine what you want. If the group and the developer can agree on this part of the building — the part of the building which most affects public space — then it is not as critical what happens to the rest of the proposal.

My experience is storeys can be added on to the top of this structure without a noticeable impact on the way the structure relates to the street provided it is set back five metres from the building face and provided there is no problematic shadowing.

A properly designed facade is also important. Many 19th-century structures are attractive, with a fine ordering of windows, marvellous details and interesting brickwork. Twentieth-century facades are generally plain and ugly, and architects have been trained to feel offended if you tell them how you want the building to look. But the group must be firm on the elements of the facade they will agree to.

The group should not forget to insist that what happens on the street level must enhance the street: no leasing to financial institutions or giant retailers, but encouraging smaller scale operations (as is being done at the site of the Honest Ed's at Bloor and Bathurst).

I tell community groups to go through this exercise and create a proposal that they like and which holds out some hope for the developer making some money.

If the developer wants to do an awful nine-storey structure, perhaps the group can show that a redesigned seven-storey structure would be acceptable to them, saving the time and cost of an OMB hearing.

My experience is this kind of approach can often result in an agreement between a community group and a developer, to the mutual benefit of both.

It's what good community planning is really all about.

*Post City Magazines' columnist John Sewell is a former mayor of Toronto and the author of a number of urban planning books, including *The Shape of the Suburbs*.*