

'Wonderful gift' coming on riverfront

Mayor to make announcement within month

By Dave Hall, The Windsor Star

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Mayor Eddie Francis is promising he'll have "a positive exciting announcement" for the riverfront within the next month.

Will it be a transient marina? Restaurants? Shops? The mayor isn't saying. But on Wednesday he said he remains committed to finding appropriate uses for the parkland at the foot of Ouellette Avenue while still preserving the city's legacy.

"This announcement, made in conjunction with one of our corporate partners, will be a wonderful gift to the city," said Francis while declining to add further details.

The largely passive parkland, which stretches from Hiram Walker distillery to the Ambassador Bridge, has long been a point of contention for those who favour light commercial uses, such as cafes, marinas and shops, and those who favour its current use as a parkland vista finally shed of its railroad tracks.

Francis said he continues to voice his full support for a transient marina and believes "a shovel will finally be put in the ground but only after both the aquatic centre and Art Gallery project are complete.

The issue has touched a nerve in the community. More than 1,100 respondents to a Windsor Star poll asking whether shops and cafes should be allowed on the riverfront voted 68 per cent in favour of such development.

And responses to a Windsor Star editorial in favour of limited commercial development along the passive parkland have been mixed.

Some have suggested limited use of cafes and restaurants would bring more people downtown and increase the use and exposure of the park while others suggest Windsor needs all the green space it can create and it would be a mistake to commercialize any of it.

Nancy Battagello, whose late husband Roy, a former city councillor, was a strong supporter of the riverfront parkland, remains adamantly opposed to any further commercialization.

"I think they're mad to be considering it," said Battagello. "It took so long to get the tracks and everything else out of there that to me, it dishonours the memory of those who fought so hard to create a natural parkland.

"There's already too much asphalt and concrete without adding any more," she said.

"It's a slippery slope and if you allow some, there will be pressure to allow more."

But Larry Horwitz, president of the Downtown Windsor Business Improvement Association board of directors, whose members could potentially benefit from added traffic in the downtown core, said his group is "strongly in favour of light commercial development, nothing intrusive but something which could help draw residents and tourists alike into the city centre."

Referring to his days as a resident of New York City, Horwitz said that "Central Park is its jewel and the riverfront is ours and I believe we can find the right mix of light commercial development to make it work.

"Obviously, you want to keep the view and as much green space as you can but if you want to attract residents to the core, you have to have some commerce and other attractions as well."

Matt Marchand, president and CEO of the Windsor Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce, said his organization hasn't taken a stand on the issue but would be in favour of studying the idea to see if it gains any support.

"It never hurts to revisit existing policies and legislation to see if there's been any change in will or opinion," said Marchand, who worked in Mayor Mike Hurst's office when this issue was last before council.

"There are times when you need to revisit these issues to see if the policies that are in place are still achieving the desired results or whether or not people have changed their opinions over time," said Marchand.

"As a chamber, we would certainly be interested in playing a role in any future discussions or studies," said Marchand.

Battagello said that no matter what development occurs, it would be "all seasonal anyway since few people would use it in the winter.

"Some people have said that it's a small town attitude to oppose development but to me, it's modern and progressive to be supporting environmental issues and developing as much parkland as possible," she said. "There are cities everywhere trying to reclaim their waterfront so why would we give it up."

Horwitz said the key issue for his organization is developing a stronger connection between the riverfront and the core to draw people out of the parklands and into the heart of the city.

"You have to connect the two and we've done a really bad job," he said. "We need crosswalks, maybe even cobblestone areas so that drivers know that's the go-slow zone and they're likely to encounter pedestrians crossing Riverside Drive," said Horwitz. "Unfortunately, we have a busy street that blocks that connection and we need to find a way to overcome it."

Francis agreed with the notion that better connections between the parklands and the city core need to be explored even so far as utilizing vacant railway corridors, just west of downtown.

"We have an artificial divide between the parks and the rest of the core and we need to speed up some sort of connecting network," said Francis.

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