

## Habitat project a go

### Council votes 3-2 in favour of redesignation of 2.37 acre land next to Monklands

Updated 23 hours ago

Scott Mitchell

Senior Reporter

Much to the dismay of west side residents, city council decided Monday to go ahead with a controversial Habitat for Humanity development on First Avenue next to Monklands Soccer Park.

Council decided 3-2 in favour of the proposed redesignation of the 2.37-acre area from P-1 to R-4, that will see a combination of condominium/townhouse style housing with anywhere from 13 to 26 units per acre (UPA).

After Alderman Shawn Howard and Alderman Marlene Weaver excused themselves from vote because they were not present for the first public hearing in December, Aldermen Kelly Hegg, Richard Siemens voted against the proposal.

Aldermen Glenda Alexander and Fred Burley voted for the proposal, with Mayor Linda Bruce also in favour.

The parcel of land has been used as overflow parking for the soccer fields for the past 19 years.

After recessing the public hearing in December over concerns about the validity of a traffic impact assessment (TIA) done in the area last May, the hearing reconvened Monday night at 7 p.m. in front of a jammed council chambers.

It was contentious and tension-filled from the beginning, with the mayor having to send aldermen into an unscheduled recess after a resident openly and without process began questioning ISL Engineering and Land Services' Chris Delaney about the city's relationship with the company.

A second TIA on Jan. 12, 2010, confirmed the numbers from the first report that said the proposed development next to Ralph McCall School would only increase traffic four to six per cent. The TIA also said First Avenue was operating at close to 60 per cent capacity.

While residents did show up in favour of the proposed site for the Habitat for Humanity development, the majority was opposed in the standing room only council chambers.

Residents were also frustrated that the reopened public hearing only allowed them to express concerns over the traffic impact assessment and left out problems with the loss of green space, proximity to the schools, property values, as well as any other concerns they might have had.

"This is not the end of this discussion, we have many legal and civil actions at our disposal to block this development," one resident fumed in front of aldermen before the decision was made.

For Alderman Hegg, the emotional attachment of the need for affordable housing didn't outweigh the fact that he didn't feel it was the right area. Hegg is a principal at a Calgary school.

"There is a need for affordable housing in this city and Habitat for Humanity is an honourable one," Hegg said. "But is this the right spot for this? I don't think it is."

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Alderman Burley disagreed.

"This meets so many of the criteria we had for Habitat: close to schools, close to transit, close to downtown – I've heard all the arguments, but I will be supporting it," he said.

Before voting for the proposal, Mayor Bruce lamented over the lack of funding from the province to build new schools and also touched on the loss of green space, construction site safety and traffic concerns.

She also noted that the density would not be nearly as high as the maximum that is allowed.

"I get your concerns around traffic and around the interface and I certainly get your concerns around child safety," Bruce said, while also noting that she has kids at the tri-school site in Airdrie and traffic problems are inherent with school sites.

Habitat for Humanity president and CEO Andrew MacLachlan said the residents' concerns would be taken into account and confirmed that the development will be nowhere near the maximum density.

"The message was heard by us loud and clear," MacLachlan said. "The residents have legitimate concerns that need to be addressed and we'll continue working with council to address those concerns.

"It's never been our intention to build to that capacity for two reasons. The site just can't accommodate that and Habitat for Humanity doesn't build that type of housing for its residents.

"It will be substantially less than 57 units."

While tempers flared and the decision was clearly not supported by the majority in attendance, the mayor came away feeling good about the night and the decision made.

"You guys have done yourself very proud tonight," she said to those in attendance. "Thank you for coming out, thank you for believing in your community. You are very, very good citizens."

At the end of the meeting, after most residents had left, Alderman Howard requested that planning staff bring back a report on the issue surrounding Our Lady Queen of Peace School closing off the parking to the public.

Construction could start as early as this summer.

"We could start construction on the first six homes or so by July of this year," MacLachlan said. "We're moving forward on the next steps right away."

Habitat for Humanity will now proceed with the development and building permit process.

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