

## Tall tales

The architecture and development debate moves out of the downtown core with a proposed Windsor Street seniors residence.

by Sean Flinn

Stillness fills the inside of St. John's United Church, a large red-brick building at the corner of Windsor and Willow streets. The church was closed two years ago when structural and environmental assessments concluded the building was beyond repair. Worshippers now assemble at the nearby Maritime Conservatory.

Louisa Horne and Heather Bown have returned to their old haunt to discuss the proposal to redevelop St. John's. Horne sits on the volunteer board overseeing the project while Brown, who works for Michael Napier Architecture, is its lead architect. Called SPIRIT Place, the redevelopment adds another dimension to the debate over architecture and development in this city.

Horne outlines the multi-use building's components: a smaller church; "60-ish" seniors' apartments (focusing on LGBT people as part of St. John's "affirming" theology); meeting and community program space. "Social justice and social action are part of the foundation of this congregation," she says.

SPIRIT Place proposes a height increase to seven storeys from the five that exist now---an increase of 11 feet from the current highest point, a peaked roof. Ample residential space is required to meet a real social need, says Horne. "There has been no affordable, independent seniors' housing built on the peninsula in a very long time."

The church will pay rent to the non-profit organization that runs SPIRIT Place. "Any profit that comes as the mortgage is paid off will have to, according to the bylaws, go into making the apartments more affordable," she says.

Liz Cunningham peaks her fingers and then straightens them out, saying: "This is enormously different than this."

Standing in her backyard on North Street, the brick facade of St. John's is easily reached across the fence. Several houses on North back onto the church, forming another boundary. "Generally speaking it's too large in height and volume for this residential neighbourhood," says Cunningham.

The architects addressed that concern following previous public meetings, says Bown. "We took the top storey and we pinched it in," she says. To further ease the impact, she adds, "We created a green roof around the entire perimeter of the top."

Just ahead of Halloween's costumed canvassers, opponents and proponents of SPIRIT Place's design are going door-to-door to gauge and gather support. Cunningham belongs to a group of roughly 30 people who oppose the proposed design, not the "spirit" of SPIRIT Place. They live on surrounding streets and have collected over 125 signatures on a petition they'll present to HRM.

HRM senior planner Luc Ouellet has met with both sides. He hopes to begin drafting his recommendation on SPIRIT Place to council, which approves or rejects the proposal, in late November. Jennifer Watt, the local councillor, has recused herself because she attends St. John's.

"There've been quite a few churches that have come to us to ask for a specific set of amendments to allow them to do more than what their zone allows," says Ouellet. "It has to do with churches closing. They're putting their properties on the market."

The St. John's property is zoned R-2, a medium-density residential zone which allows no more than a three- or four-unit apartment building. But, Ouellet says, the SPIRIT Place board is well within its rights to apply to amend its designation under the Peninsula North Secondary Planning Strategy and form a development agreement with HRM. "We would put specific policies [in place] to allow for that to happen, and also specific policies to control. We would specify the height and whatnot for that agreement."

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