



THE PROFILE of the city's downtown could change dramatically if these plans for a courthouse, parking garage and office tower becomes reality. The rough plans, drawn by architect Peter Lesdow, place the courthouse on Ontario Street with a 10-storey office building where Huron Street is currently

situated. Huron Street would be closed from Erie to Ontario Avenue. The parking garage would be situated between Erie Avenue and Morrison Street. The plans also call for a stream and pond to run through the complex.

## Mayor on cloud nine over courthouse plan but some aldermen not so sure

By LOUSMYRLIS  
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Mayor Bill Smeaton is on "cloud nine" after council made its first serious move Monday towards getting a new courthouse. But three aldermen say they doubt the city struck the best deal possible.

Two aldermen say the city has significantly weakened its bargaining position by rushing to pick the developer it wants to build the new courthouse. They charge council's haste could cost the city millions of dollars. The other alderman says the wrong developer was chosen.

Alderman Pat Cummings says a desire to look good in an election year is the real reason behind council's quick decision.

Numerous clichés expressing elation over clearing the first hurdle towards the new courthouse and the enthusiasm of several aldermen drowned out the doubts of the three opposing aldermen. But despite council's majority decision to give the go-ahead to Toronto developer Leon Sharon's plans for a downtown courthouse the three aldermen remain vocal in their criticism.

"It's too early to call off negotiations; we could have played one developer against the other," Mr. Cummings told The Review. "I was shocked they (aldermen) didn't want to do that."

Mr. Sharon sold council on his multi-million dollar plan for a courthouse, office tower and above-ground parking garage in an area bounded by Ontario Avenue, Erie Avenue, Queen Street and Morrison Street. The plan calls for considerable landscaping, including a pond and stream running through the centre of the complex.

He beat out a proposal from local lawyer Dante Marinelli and St. Catharines developer Ken Fowler. Their plans called for a courthouse, parking garage and two office towers connected by above-ground enclosed walkways. But the plans paid little attention to landscaping and made the office towers the first priority in construction.

Both developers wanted the city to pick up the tab for the parking garage. The Sharon proposal called for a \$1.3-million garage while Mr. Marinelli's garage would cost more than \$2 million. Both developers however, stressed their proposals were flexible.

Mr. Cummings and Ald. Dick Harrington say they don't want the city to pay for the garage.

"The cost of the parking structure should be paid by the developer. I don't know why the city should get involved," Mr. Cummings said, adding if the city had continued

negotiating it might have escaped the garage expense.

However Mayor Smeaton said the developers didn't want to be pitted against each other.

"They both made it clear they weren't going to spend money and time in a horse race," he said.

Mr. Cummings cites a different reason for council's quick decision.

"Aldermen want to get the courthouse tied up during this political term," he said, suggesting they are looking ahead to the November municipal election.

Mr. Harrington says "for the moment" he is taking the mayor at his word.

Meanwhile, Ald. Norm Puttick says the city chose the wrong developer.

"I think Marinelli was the best person," Mr. Puttick said. "He was the first person who came forward. He is very well known and is familiar with city and the attitudes of the area."

But other aldermen contacted by The Review, including Mr. Cummings and Mr. Harrington, say the Sharon proposal was the best.

"We had to make a choice and we made the best choice based on the information we had," Ald. Mark Hopkins said.

He added the Marinelli proposal

was of a "more speculative nature" and building the two office towers would have created more office space than needed.

"We don't need to fool ourselves in Niagara Falls. It's not that big a downtown," he said.

Mr. Puttick, a frequent critic of the mayor, also blamed Mr. Smeaton for not allowing a decision on the developer to be made earlier.

"I wanted to make a decision a week-and-a-half before Christmas and the mayor said he would veto that because he wanted to be there (he was out of town)," Mr. Puttick, who says he is considering running for mayor, charged.

The project will make Mr. Smeaton, who has been flubbing the issue for years, look good, the alderman added.

The city and the developer still need to coax the Ministry of the Attorney General to move its provincial court into the new building to make the project worth pursuing.

Currently the city leases the Queen Street courthouse — considered a security risk by local police — to the ministry. However a lease for this year hasn't been worked out yet and last month the ministry, angered by the city's refusal to grant a long term lease, said it would be looking for new court space.