

March 19, 2025

Planning Committee Members
City of Kingston
216 Ontario St.
Kingston, ON K7L 2Z3

Dear Councillors:

As a resident of 5 Gore St. and a constituent in District 11 King's Town, I have been engaged in the public discussions on the development of 5 Lower Union ever since it was sold to private developers and have closely followed the various iterations of the project since 2017.

Clearly, every decision on development involves balancing often conflicting imperatives. On one hand, the City needs to meet the demand for new housing. At the same time, city councillors are elected ensure that Kingston residents can enjoy neighborhoods that are livable, sustainable and respect the unique heritage of this area.

Along with many residents in the affected neighborhood, I continue to have concerns about the current state of the Homestead project along with the Report to the Planning Committee which endorses it without recommendations for any significant changes. For the sake of brevity, let me point to what I see as at least two major issues that remain unresolved --- and I look forward to a more robust discussion of such issues when the Report is discussed by the Committee.

1. Building Scale, Form and Spatial/Visual Impact

First, councilors should carefully consider whether the scale and design of this building truly is an optimal fit for the residential neighborhood. While 5 Lower Union may be close to the downtown, the projected building is not on an urban street-front --- as such, the project is not analogous other recently-approved high-rises such as the Capitol Theatre and the Homestead Queen's Street buildings. The proposed building on 5 Lower Union is a building set in a waterfront park and is part of the historic district of Sydenham ward – and it is this unique location that should inform both its size and design.

It is salient to note that Homestead's first iteration of the residential building (that was discussed in a Planning Committee meeting in 2021) was designed at the height of 14-storey with a projected 68 units for occupancy. At the time, the design was in line with the recommendations made to city planners in a 2018 report by Dillon Consulting that the appropriate height for any such building on 5 Lower Union be no more 14-storey. So, we fast forward to the current proposal – and find the building to be significantly larger (19 storey and 118 units) than the size that was deemed appropriate for neighborhood just three years prior. There have been no significant changes in the surrounding buildings in the neighborhood in the interim --- so why is the 19-storey design now considered to be the appropriate size in relation to the buildings and homes around it? Certainly, this raises the questions of whether the city is going to maintain any real standards on the size of buildings in residential neighborhoods or whether the “goalposts” will be constantly shifted to accommodate whatever interests are at play.

The size and scale of the building have important implications for its visual and spatial impact. Councillors should closely read the very thorough architectural critique laid out by Paul Mitchell (contained in your Agenda package) which describes the relationship between the size of the building and the design features. As he argues, the design of the building falls short of current standards of “best practices” in numerous ways. The large base and mass of the proposed building is obstructive of pedestrian views to the sky and the water. The design of 5 Lower Union is also in stark contrast with the size and visual impact of buildings in Block D which are located at a reasonable setback from the waterfront. Moreover, the standard practice should be to lower building heights toward the perimeter of higher density areas such as Block D; the current proposal does exactly opposite.

2. Mixed-Use Zoning/Deep-water Dock

Councillors should carefully consider the zoning issues involved in allowing for the proposed continued designation of this area as a harbour. Presumably, this element in the “mixed-zoning” status of the site will allow for a possible development of deep-water dock at some point in the future. There has been no real public discussion or thorough technical analyses of dock construction by City and the suggestion that this may be one of the collateral benefits of this project seems fanciful at best. Councillors should carefully read the excellent analysis laid out by Jim Parker in his letter of September 30 2024 (included in the package) about the myriad environmental, traffic and other impacts of a cruise-ship dock project in residential neighborhood. Council should take actions to stipulate that the 5 Lower Union residential building project (should it be approved) does not encompass any concession, tacit or otherwise, to facilitate a dock project. Any such project would require robust studies and a transparent process to consult with citizens --- and none of that has taken place thus far. At a time when many cities around the world are taking actions to mitigate the negative effects of the cruise industry, Kingston should take heed and not assume that “more” tourism of any sort is a benefit.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to a thoughtful discussion of these matters in the Planning Committee meeting.

Sincerely,

Catherine Conaghan
5 Gore St.