

Presentation to Planning and Housing Committee, Aug. 28, 2024

-Chuck Shields

I have been a member of the 1st Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa for 40 years and am currently the President of the Board.

Nearly 60 years ago the Congregation moved from their beloved home on Elgin Street that had served them for over half a century to a new building that, at the time, seemed far to the west, on the other side of Westboro. They moved to a campus that provided space for their new building and their dreams. Among those dreams, the leaders of the congregation wanted to contribute to meeting Ottawa's needs of services for children and for the elderly.

The first step was to provide space to the River Parkway Children's Centre (RPCC), an educational daycare that operated for many years in the basement rooms of the congregation. Not many years later plans began to take shape that led to the creation in 1984 of Unitarian House, a modern facility that provides services to the elderly with different levels of need. The First Unitarian Congregation provided the land on its campus and other supports for the construction.

A few years later the RPCC secured funding to build a dedicated early childhood education facility and again the First Unitarian Congregation provided land on its campus.

That left a large parking area in the centre of the campus. Members of the congregation began asking what other needs there were in the city that might be addressed through the use of this land and decided that providing housing would be a worthy goal. In keeping with its many-year commitment to social justice, the congregation investigated and discussed what might be done. Gradually the vision emerged to add to the city's supply of affordable and deeply affordable housing.

In 2018 the members of the congregation voted to move forward to add affordable housing to its campus. As part of this decision, the congregation committed to 4 goals:

- To respond to the housing crisis in the City of Ottawa, converting asphalt parking to affordable rental homes;
- To provide a tangible and meaningful step towards reconciliation;
- To demonstrate a high-level of environmental performance in construction of the buildings and by taking advantage of proximity to LRT; and,
- To create a sustaining revenue stream to help support the congregation's mission in the community far into the future.

The congregation then invested in studies, conducted surveys and held many sessions both with its members and the community to discuss what might be done. Finally, in March 2023, the members of the congregation voted 95% in favour of a plan that would see the construction of two buildings and the creation of Odayanhaway, or Little Village. One building will be six-stories, in collaboration with Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services, on land that the congregation will provide them free. The other building will be 16-storeys in collaboration with Theia Partners. Together the buildings will provide approximately 220 rental homes with over 80% being affordable or deeply affordable.

In its planning, the congregation decided to express its values through the construction of these buildings:

- by ensuring that 80% or more of the 220 units in the project will be affordable or deeply affordable,
- by mandating that highly sustainable approaches be used in construction and in the two buildings' operation,
- by acting in keeping with the congregation's commitment to reconciliation by giving Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services the land they will use to construct their 6-storey building,
- by supporting sustainability by generating housing that reinforces the city's goal of 15-minute neighborhoods by being within 200 meters of an LRT station and being close to excellent cycling infrastructure, and,
- by protecting the natural environment by ensuring construction will have minimal impact on the many mature trees and the award-winning gardens that are on the congregation's campus.

The congregation is also committed to protecting the safety of those on our campus, both during and after construction. This includes the residents of Unitarian House, the children and their families of River Parkway Children's Centre and the members of our congregation. We and our development partners will work with and solicit input from all these groups as the site and construction plans are developed.

I and other members of the congregation are looking forward to the city's approval of our proposal, which will allow us to create Odayanhaway and expand the vibrant community that is our campus.