

Why the Clock Tower mid-rise proposal makes sense for Main Street

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The Newmarket Main Street area is at a crossroads. Things started to look better with the construction of Riverwalk Commons but the economic outlook of the area stalled in 2015. People talk about the crowds at the restaurants, but that was in 2014. I live and work on Main Street and I have witnessed that business fell in 2015. Retail businesses are leaving and are being replaced by services; even the banks have left. (Bank of Montreal will be leaving in June.) Yes, the property values have gone up but this only means that housing prices have risen dramatically, making homes in the area unaffordable for young people. It is the young who are the engine of the economy, as they spend money while seniors don't.

Some people talk about how Main Street used to be the centre of Newmarket. The important phrase is "used to be." It isn't any more, the centre has moved to Yonge & Davis. That is what many people think when I tell them I live in downtown Newmarket. Yonge & Davis is where development is going in the official Town plan, not Main Street.

So, how can Main Street thrive? It either becomes a quaint tourist destination or it can be regenerated by having young people and their families move into the neighbourhood. But the latter can't happen without affordable housing within strolling distance. Affordable housing on Davis will not help Main Street.

This is where the Clock Tower development proposal by the Forrest Group comes in. A 7 story mid-rise with 165 one and two bedroom apartments would mean approximately 240 new residents. There have been objections to the height and size of the proposed project but anything much smaller would not be of any consequential benefit to Main Street. A low-rise project as suggested by opponents to the proposal would have fewer units which means their prices would be proportionally higher and so would no longer be affordable by the young people that Main Street needs.

Looking strictly at the technical aspects of the Forrest Group's Clock Tower proposal, it conforms with the Guidelines For Buildings as set out in Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada [1] published by the Government of Canada. Where the proposal encounters difficulty is in the Guidelines For Cultural Landscapes in Reference 1. While a low-rise building would clearly meet and a high-rise one clearly violate the guidelines, the proposed mid-rise building falls into the interpretive grey zone.

The following analysis and conclusions that I make on the impact of the proposed project on the landscape of Main Street are based on my 30+ years of experience as a photographer.

Figure 1 is an aerial photo of central Newmarket from the south. The Main Street Heritage District is clearly visible as stands from the surrounding residential neighbourhoods. The most prominent features (ignoring the temporary tennis dome) are the high-rise apartment building by Fairy Lake and Tannery Mall on Davis Drive. From this angle, the proposed Clock Tower project would obscure Trinity United Church but it would not appreciably alter the landscape.



Figure 1. Photo by Greg King

Figure 2 is a close-up aerial of the downtown core from the south-east. In this view you can see several massive 20th century buildings: Founders Place, Buckley Insurance, Newmarket Public Library, and Bell Canada. In this view the proposed project would only partially obscure Trinity United and the building features would blend it into the landscape.

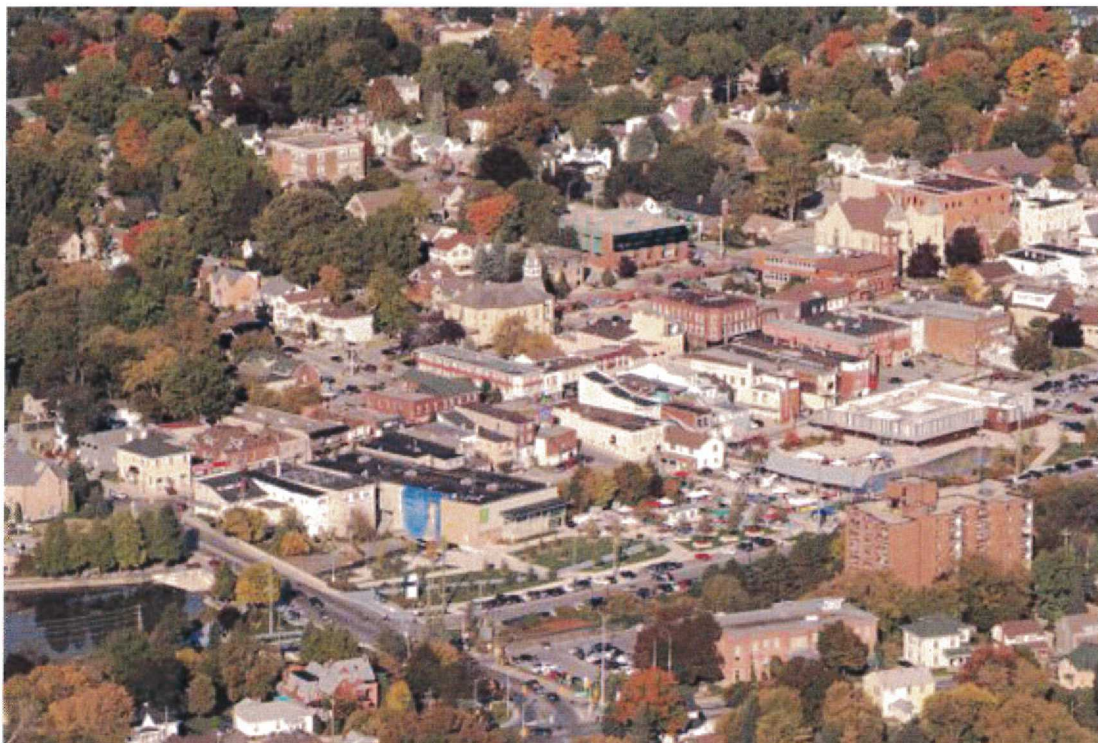


Figure 2. Photo by Greg King

Figure 3 is a street level rendition of the view from the corner of Prospect & Water streets supplied by the developer. Though the proposed project is prominent in the skyline, it does not obscure existing downtown towers. Making the top floor a light colour also reduces the impact.



Figure 3. Rendering courtesy of Forrest Group

It is possible to quantitatively measure the impact by ratioing the apparent width of the 7 story addition to the width of the Main Street skyline. Unfortunately, the view shown in Figure 3 is skewed north and cuts off the southern end of Main Street. I have approximated this value by ratioing the frontage of the project with the length of Main Street from the Christian Baptist Church to Water Street (using satellite imagery from Google) and arrived at a value of 13%. This value would vary depending on the viewing direction.

Figure 4 is a street level photo of Main Street at Timothy looking north with an ultra-wide angle lens (110° diagonal). The proposed project would not be visible. From the north (looking south), existing buildings would also block the view until one reaches Trinity United.

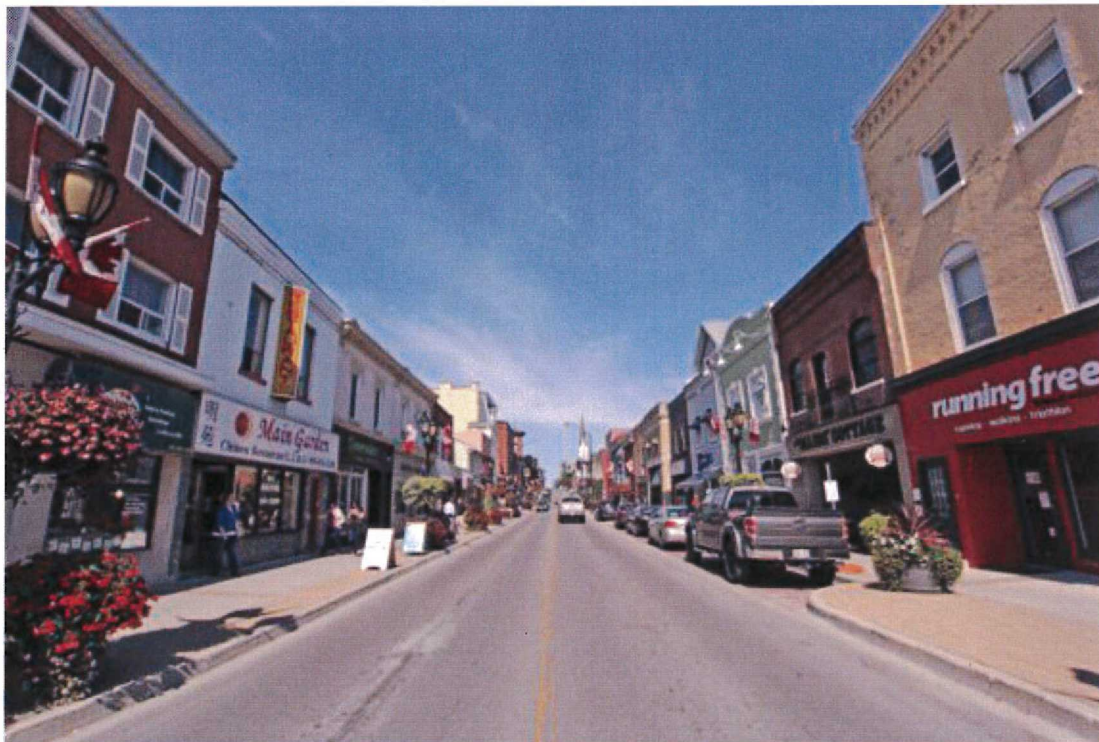


Figure 4. Photo by Greg King

The main drawing shown by Forrest Group [Figure 5] is intended to show off the project by showing the proposed building in its entirety. However, the computer generated viewpoint is at grade about 25m east of Main Street. In the real world this is a spot in the south back corner of the parking lot behind 167 Main and 2 meters above the parking lot because the ground slopes down from the street. At this point almost the entire view of Main Street is blocked by 167 and 171 Main, only a slice of Trinity is visible in the laneway to the parking lot. When you actually stand at the east side of Main & Park the visual impact of the proposed 7 story additions is lessened by the proximity of the heritage Clock Tower structure in front of them. Figure 5 exaggerates the visual impact of the project.



Figure 5. Rendering by Forrest Group

I conclude that the Forrest Group proposal for the Clock Tower will have a small to moderate impact on the landscape as it only comprises 13% of the Main Street skyline. It would also not be visible along much of Main Street. The impact of what is visible is mitigated by design features such as setting back the top floor and making it a lighter colour so that it doesn't stand out against the sky. I feel that the long term economic benefits of the proposal outweighs the negative visual impact on Main Street. There is no opening of the "door" to rampant development because it would be the only such development in the Main Street area as no other group of properties have the necessary footprint.

References

1. Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada, 2nd ed., Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, 2010.