

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION MEETING COMMENTS

15. Properties located at 551 and 555 Waterloo Street (Z-8599)

- Benita Senkevics, Monteith Brown Planning Consultants – see attached presentation.
- Ryan Singh, Owner – indicating that an escape room is essentially an activity where you and your team mates get put in a room to find clues and solve puzzles in order to get out before the time expires; pointing out that it is a fun, educational, learning activity that requires the mind and working together in groups to solve puzzles; advising that it is something that people in London have really enjoyed to date and it has really caught on; realizing that some of the letters that were received that were attached to the staff report addressed things because they were unaware of what an escape room was; advising that because they are categorized under the broad term ‘place of entertainment’, people assumed that they served alcohol and it might be some loud rambunctious activity but if you think about people in rooms solving puzzles, it is fairly quiet and it is fairly innocuous and they do not serve alcohol; advising that if anyone does come intoxicated, they turn them away because they will not have a good time and they might damage parts of the room; advising that people are only there for approximately one hour and they work together and usually form bonds doing so; noting that the puzzles that they have set up are set up for people to engage and interact so it is great for team building exercises for corporate groups and that was their primary target market but it caught on with the public; advising that the ages are from 7 to 10 years old, they have had a lot of 10 year old birthday parties come in, all the way up to senior citizens; indicating that the professor’s office is one of their mystery escape rooms and is very popular with seniors; noting that the most successful groups in the professor’s office are grandkids with their grandparents because it has the old school knowledge they do very, very well; advising that escape rooms in general started in Japan in 2006 originally it came from an idea in a video game in the 1990’s called “Mist” and someone in Japan decided what if we make a real life escape room; indicating that this caught on and spread throughout Asia, the first one in North America was in San Francisco in 2012 and it spread throughout the States, the first one in Canada was in British Columbia and in October, 2013, the first one in Toronto opened; indicating that there are over 45 escape rooms in Toronto right now, each having several rooms; noting that it has become a very popular activity; advising that when they decided to open in London, they were on the fence because they did not know how well it would do in London; noting that they really hoped it would catch on but their target market was corporate team building because they thought that would be a great market to get and they knew teams would come in from corporate groups in order to experience games because everyone is seeking team building exercises; indicating that they have a Corporate Psychologist on board who is able to design specific puzzles in order to test particular traits and corporations still take advantage of that all the time; reiterating that it caught on with the public and they are very happy with that but they felt that they would fall under the Office use and when they were looking for many of the places to lease when they first started in August, September and October, 2014, they looked at some of their competitors locations including where Exodus is right now but they felt that Mystery Escape Rooms would be best served at 551 Waterloo Street, the atmosphere felt right and they thought there would be no issue; if not, they would have gone with one of the other locations; reiterating that they really thought that they would be ok; indicating that they opened up and it caught on with the public; pointing out that in January, 2015, they received the complaint that they were not zoned properly for the area; indicating that they decided to seek out a consulting firm and explained their plight and the firm indicated that they would have a good chance of getting temporary zoning; advising that they thought it would be great and give them lots of time to decide what to do; indicating that in April, when they went to the pre-application consultation, the person they were speaking with until that point was a junior on the file and that was the only contact that they had; noting that they found out, after that application meeting that their chances really were not good and they need to do something about this and they started looking for a place to buy rather

than lease because the current lease that they have, they were not able to change a lot of the things in the escape rooms; noting that there are cool little things in escape rooms like trap doors and secret passageways that they could not do because they are in a heritage building; indicating that the only place that they could have the zoning was in the Downtown core; advising that they put an offer in to purchase the building in May, 2015; and because of the City strike and all of the due diligence could not be performed between May and August, 2015; noting that, in August, 2015, the sale went through and they took possession of the building; thinking that it would be easy to get up and running as they needed a handicap washroom and a couple of walls put up; nothing that required a permit and then they found out that they required architectural approval and engineering approval in order to receive the permit; indicating that they had already put an ad in Business London magazine saying that they would be open October, 2015; indicating that they have been in the stage of dealing with architects and engineers since then and they finally have approved documents submitted and they have that application for the permit; working very hard; pointing out that they had tenants in the building until very recently when he asked them to move out because they thought they were moving in; noting that he would not have done that if they thought this process would not be moving forward quickly; indicating that they have asked for a year but now it is probably going to only be seven more months until that permit is in for them to stay in their current location; reiterating that they just need enough time to build their location and finish the renovations because it is a four storey building and it is requiring a lot; indicating that they will have put over \$1,500,000 by the time that they are done; advising that they may need to close and their employees will lose their jobs; trying their best to stay open; noting that when they expand to the new location they are going to hire even more people but if they are not allowed to do that because they get shut down and they do not have the ability to pay for those renovations, they are not going to be able to do it and they are going to have to stop; working as fast as they can; noting that they have taken out commercial and personal mortgages to make this happen; indicating that they have replied to everyone who wrote a letter to everyone who wrote in; pointing out that they did not have parking signs up beforehand which possibly created some confusion and they have since remedied that; pointing out that they have never had an issue or any complaints in terms of parking; noting that they have not had their entire lot full when they are busy; and, indicating that they have done their best to make this work and they have completed drawings ready for their new location; *(Councillor Helmer notes that, on the other side of the block is Centennial Hall, and enquires if it is classified as a 'place of entertainment')*; Mr. B. Turcotte, Senior Planner, responds that it is classified as a 'place of entertainment' and is also designated in the Downtown area as well.