

Property values brought into focus as residents, ratepayers speak up on stable neighbourhoods



By Brock Weir

Property values came into sharp focus Wednesday night as residents had their say on protecting the future of Aurora's stable neighbourhoods.

Nearly 100 residents turned out for last week's Public Planning meeting, which was the first opportunity they had to state their positions to Council following a consultant's report recommending measures the Town can put in place to restrict large-scale infill developments in long-established communities like Regency Acres, Aurora Heights and the homes in the vicinity of Town Park. Wednesday's speakers offered a cross-section of opinion, including representatives from the three neighbourhood's ratepayers associations. While speakers in many of the previous public meetings on the issue have been largely in favour of tighter restrictions to curb the building of so-called 'monster homes,' there was more of a split last week as residents offered concerns on the impact new zoning provisions might have on the resale value of their homes.

This, however, is an issue that is being given too much weight, according to some of the ratepayers' representatives.

'Our association is pleased Council hired a consultant to help the Town find a way to address the contentious issues related to the redevelopment now occurring in Regency Acres and Aurora Heights and Town Park area,' said Sandra Sangster, representing the Regency Acres Ratepayers Association. 'This redevelopment has been contentious because, to many residents, it contradicts Aurora's provincially approved Official Plan. Our Town's plan emphasises the importance of protecting stable neighbourhoods by ensuring that redeveloping is compatible in building scale, design and respects the existing physical character of our single communities. The report prepared by the planning partnership states that the recommendations will identify of planning approaches available to the municipality that can help to find a balance between protecting those character-giving elements that make these neighbourhoods attractive places to live and providing flexibility needed to support innovation and ongoing investment as these neighbourhoods continue to evolve.'

While Ms. Sangster said the Regency Acres ratepayers are 'pleased' with many of the recommendations made by the consultant, there were 'significant concerns' that needed to be addressed, including the process of measuring the height of new builds, and challenging the idea that what the Ratepayers want is a 'radical' departure from what is already in place.

'Our past delegations at Council have consistently focused on finding the balance between neighbourhood renewal and the preservation of neighbourhood character,' she said. 'Our goals and associations identical to the stated vision of stable neighbourhoods that is really articulated in our Official Plan. The consultant's report, in our opinion, seems to stoke these fears [of radical change] by overemphasizing the opinion of three individuals from two firms that deal primarily with commercial real estate and his client base includes major development. The potential risk of downzoning is restated on eight separate pages in the report. This repetition serves in our view to magnify the potential risks in the absence of actual numbers and evidence. The changes our associations have asked for are far from radical and are in line with many that other towns and cities have already done for their mature neighbourhoods.'

This was a view shared by Neil Asselin, who spoke at the podium on behalf of the Town Park Residents Ratepayers Association. The point in the report arguing that property values could be reduced, along with future redevelopment potential, was something he said might be the most 'polarizing' point to emerge from last week's Public Planning meeting, and he advised Council to use 'caution' in evaluating this issue.

Arguments like this are easy to make and can be used as a battering ram to the whole subject of protecting our stable neighbourhoods. Especially when, as my previous colleagues suggested, when there is no empirical evidence, he said. The concerns of my fellow residents that are worried about the value of their property are legitimate, but it would be foolish to think those of us seeking protections for our neighborhood do not see the financial impact of reckless, unbridled redevelopment that is allowing for a cacophony of out of scale monster homes that are disrupting the order of our streetscape. I too am concerned about the value of my home, but I find that the research used in the study to be a little bit thin. Any protections should be measured and thoughtful.

Balance is essential, he added, and the groups recognize that development is key to the revitalization of older neighbourhoods. What we're asking for is to do so in a way that is smart and protective to the attributes that distinguish them from other neighbourhoods in Town while being non-restrictive to future development and investment, he concluded.

But many of the residents who stepped forward underscored the worries they had over new zoning restrictions making a dent on their investment.

If we are too restrictive in what is put forth in stable neighbourhoods, we're going to impact the value of our properties, said Ron Cocking. We believe we will be affected if we curtail development. I'm not looking for people to come in here and buy our houses and move in. Families don't buy the houses in Regency Acres. We're seeing developers, fair enough, buy them and turn them into rental properties. No issue with that either. The problem becomes if we don't continue to allow development and growth in the neighborhood the neighbourhood is going to stagnate and we're going to run into issues and we're seeing some right now.

This was echoed by a resident of Seaton Drive, who said, he was totally opposed to the consultant's recommendations.

These older homes, 50 or 60 years old, all need so much renovation. Electrical is shot in these buildings. Whenever I look at these older homes, they do not meet the new building code. Not even close. It will cost more to renovate than to put a new building up. I spent \$150,000 on renovations, trying to bring it up to building code. A very small house, but if you can't afford the reno, let people build any house size they want. There's too much red tape with this new bylaw and people can't get anything done. It is other people dictating what you can build and what you can't have. It will put prices down and people are not going to buy these small homes.