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"Henderson Forest" advocates call on Town to release info

By Brock Weir

It is said knowledge is power, and advocates fighting to preserve the land known as ?Henderson Forest? are looking for a full arsenal.

Representatives from the Save the Henderson Forest Ratepayers Group, a group calling on Council to act to preserve the privately-owned parcel of land on Henderson Drive currently under consideration for the construction of two large homes, which, they say amounts to over 49,000 square feet of significant woodland.

The Henderson Forest Aurora Ratepayers Association appeared at Council last week to back a motion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner calling on the Town to release any and all municipal information as it relates to 672 and 684 Henderson Drive, ?including but not limited to prior correspondence and Closed Session Reports and Minutes excluding anything currently being considered by Council in Closed Session? to the public and the Committee of Adjustment before future meetings on the lands.

While the request did not go exactly as hoped for the Councillor and Ratepayers, it did take a step in that general direction.

?For nearly two years, the community has been fighting to protect an area of pristine woodland on the Oak Ridges Moraine,? said George Skoulikas, who delegated to Council on behalf of the Ratepayers. ?To put things into perspective [the land is] over 49,000 square feet of significant woodland, with mature trees that have been providing an important service to the community for decades and which will be playing an even more important role in the future challenging years of climate change. These trees are our ?green infrastructure', filtering air pollution and stormwater, mitigating heat and drought and also preventing erosion.

?This woodland must remain intact in order to protect its ecological integrity.?

To underscore their argument, Mr. Skoulikas referenced a report on the property compiled by the University of Toronto's Forestry Department, which said that while the loss of ?another area of forest is no big deal,? the incremental loss of forests has ?huge ecological impacts, including habitat loss, forest fragmentation, and edge effects.?

The Ratepayers, he continued, are trying to save .45 hectares of endangered species habitat, including habitat for two endangered species of bats whose population has declined by over 90 per cent in recent years, the habitat of a thriving Special Concern turtle population, habitats for varieties of woodpeckers, and the health of Tannery Creek, associated wetlands and significant valley lands.

?Simply put, this land should be preserved,? he concluded. ?We believe the Town of Aurora, its Council and its residents share the same goal, which is clearly reflected in the aim and intent of the Official Plan, ?to guide the Town's evolution and development to the year 2031 with new emphasis on environmental responsibility.' Given the importance of protecting these lands, we would like to know the history on the Henderson Drive properties, a history that dates back decades. The history may or may not be helpful, but in the spirit of transparency, we would appreciate being able to make that judgement for ourselves.

?We're asking [to have full access to the files] not just for those of us here today, but for the future generations of Aurorans who stand to lose if this area of pristine, environmentally protected woodland is destroyed. Once it's gone, it's gone.?

The Ratepayers sent in a Freedom of Information (FOI) request in 2017 shortly after the application to develop the land was filed. Mr. Skoulikas said they were told there was no historical information on the property, but they have since learned there is more information to be found.

?We know there is information and we want to access it,? he said.?

Speaking to her motion, Councillor Gaertner said if there is any previous information on this land prior to the last Council term, that did not come forward.

?If it had been pertinent now, we would have received it, and so we didn't, I just think this is kind of a non-event to help our residents,? she said.

However, the wording of the motion gave some Council members paused when it was pointed out by Town Solicitor Patricia De Sario that were it to pass unaltered, any Closed Session reports would have to be released to the public.

?Obviously I am not in favour of releasing stuff that clearly Council has not said yes to releasing,? said Councillor John Gallo. ?If the intent is to review all the in-camera stuff and we deem particularly the in-camera stuff can be released because it poses no issues with the Town, then I am in favour of it. I am happy to go through the process if there is something in Closed Session we deem has no bearing legally to the corporation.?

The interest of protecting the Town and residents should be first and foremost in Council's eyes, added Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who suggested adding one step to the process outlined in the motion: holding a Closed Session meeting where all the relevant documents can be reviewed, and the decision made on what could be released.

?Let's just take that one step just to make sure we're protecting the Town through staff support and ultimately releasing the

information if we feel it is the right thing to do,? she said.
Councillor Michael Thompson agreed, stating Closed Session reports should only be released once they have had a chance to review them, discuss them in detail with staff, and understand the concerns the Town Solicitor or Clerk might have if they are to be released.
?At the end of the day, we're responsible for the corporation and we need to understand the risk, if any, to doing this and that is typically what we have done in the past with Closed Session reports,? said Councillor Thompson.
Everyone would like to have a review and discussion on Closed Session material to see if it is ?prudent? for them to be released to the public, added Mayor Mrakas.
?Everyone would like to have a look, review, and have a discussion on these closed session materials and make sure whether it is prudent on our behalf to release these, or whether we need to hold them in closed session due to the fact they might bring harm to the Town,? he said. ?I would suggest that if this is acceptable to everyone, you might defer this to our next Council meeting which would allow us to go into closed session and have these materials in front of us and we can review them and have a discussion and speak to this motion.?
The next formal Council meeting is set for March 26, following a brief Special Council meeting the Tuesday before.