

Residents call for 'compromise' on stable neighbourhoods

By Brock Weir

The details, in their view, are far from perfect, but many residents in Aurora's so-called stable neighbourhoods are looking for compromise to get firm protections in place sooner rather than later.

Last Tuesday's General Committee meeting was dominated by ongoing efforts by many Council members and residents to enact stricter bylaws on new builds in a number of key established areas around Aurora: Town Park, Regency Acres and Aurora Heights, as well as Temperance Street.

Last month, representatives from the three ratepayer groups associated with the stable neighbourhoods pointed out what they said were flaws in the methodology used by planning consultants retained by the Town to develop a series of unbiased recommendations to protect these established communities.

Those concerns are still yet to be addressed, they said, but they came to Town Hall once again last week in the spirit of compromise.

'The planning staff has recommended the original size for the new builds be 3,993 square feet, as per the consultant's report,' said Lenore Pressley, a member of the Town Park area ratepayers' association. 'This in spite of the results of using the same available data and checking the results using the median and their weighted variables. The use of the median and the application of weighted variables based on community size better reflects the characteristics of each study area. As indicated on table two of the June report, the weighted average is 3,849 square feet, while the weighted median is substantially lower at 3,216 square feet.

'Regarding the zoning standards, a consultant's report recommended building height to be 9 metres to the midpoint of the roof, in spite of the fact that many other municipalities, including Toronto, have it to nine metres to the top of the roof. We feel this is more appropriate to keep the building from overwhelming the other much lower buildings in the area. We also request that there be some separate regulations for flat roof builds, otherwise we are in agreement with the zoning standards as indicated in the report.

'Our group's executive members were told in a meeting with planning staff, a ten per cent adjustment that can be made to the results without going through another Public Planning meeting. Instead of going back to the beginning and redoing the whole process because of inaccurate data, we are asking Council to direct planning to use a weighted average of 3,849 square foot as indicated [in the June 4 staff report] and roll back the GFA (Gross Floor Area) by 10 per cent. This will be a fairer result and still allow the largest house size to be significantly bigger than most of the homes in the three areas.'

Getting down to business, David Waters, Planner for the Town of Aurora, told Council that the proposed standards previously presented to Council on March 27 have not been substantively changed since then, with no new zoning standards introduced.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner took the lead in the discussion and put forward an amendment calling on Council to adopt the 'compromise' presented by the ratepayers.

'The residents have had an onerous task through all these months to try and get something done that is actually in our Official Plan and they have worked so hard and endured so much frustration,' said Councillor Gaertner, adding she still wanted each of the three stable neighbourhoods examined separately for their own tailor-made standards.

'That would be my choice, but I think the residents have shown what they are made of by saying, 'Okay, we accept a compromise here,' and I think that is a compromise that Council could do,' she continued on their request for a 10 per cent reduction. 'There have been some issues with the process, there have been some issues with the kind of statistical analysis that was used; we don't want to go back to the beginning, but I think there is a reason and a cause to use a 10 per cent reduction in the square footage based on the weighted average.'

Councillor Gaertner's amendment received a lukewarm response from Council members.

Councillor Sandra Humfries, for instance, requested assurances that going with the 10 per cent reduction would not trigger a whole new Public Planning process. Mr. Waters replied that it 'likely' wouldn't go down that road, but said any changes Council might make have to be fully defensible if the new standards are appealed at the Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT).

'If we're going to reduce it by 10 per cent, we need to have some justification behind it,' he said.

Over the course of the meeting, Ron Palmer of the Planning Partnership, the consultant the Town retained to examine the Stable Neighbourhoods issue, was called to the podium to take questions. Here, he defended his methodology, saying it was based on 'no predetermined outcome and no bias in understanding the data or the approach.'

'In my mind, the use of weighting is a beginning of making decisions about what should count and what should not count, or how things that are counted should be treated in an unequal way,' said Mr. Palmer, responding to comments from Ms. Pressley on how a nine unit apartment building on Victoria Street was counted as one large house in the study.

Councillor John Gallo pressed the point, asking if it was 'fair' to say that one property that is 'way off the chart' would influence the data.

'The point is what is the significance of the anomaly that is included,' replied Mr. Palmer. 'The data provided is not perfect and there are other concerns with it, although I think it provides a reasonable baseline from which to draw some conclusions. My expectation of the inclusion of that particular building, notwithstanding it is part of the character of the neighbourhood, is it would have a minimal effect on the data analysis. Nonetheless, I think it is fair to say it probably should not have been included.'

Replied Councillor Gallo, 'I see a bit of a dichotomy between your answer and sticking to your numbers and some outliers you're also saying may affect that number.'

The discussion continued with Councillor Michael Thompson, who outlined Council's difficult position in coming to a final conclusion.

'There is a wide variety of opinions on what we're doing here tonight, and I think no matter what Council's decision is, there will be those who will be opposed to it,' he said, before asking Mr. Waters if he was confident the recommendations before them would meet the needs of the Town's Official Plan.

Mr. Waters replied he was 'confident that what had been produced to date through Mr. Palmer's work will work in protecting stable neighbourhoods and protecting their character.'

But, by the end of the evening, Council had voted down Councillor Gaertner's motion.

'I think we should accept what the residents want,' she concluded. 'Nobody is going to be happy; people are going to complain about this no matter what we do. It is going to be interesting what comes after we approve this, but I am asking Council to please choose a reasonable compromise to this. The residents who have fought so hard and so long probably would like to have between 2,500 and 3,000 square feet. They have really, really come a long way and they are trying to work with us.'

That ultimate approval could come as early as this week's Council meeting.

'We have been trying to find that balance,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas. 'We've hired a consultant, an expert planner, to come here and develop a methodology they put forward that puts planning principles in place and allows us to have a number that is going to allow us to keep that character of our communities. It is going to allow us to evolve and grow, but yet keep that character and maintain the

desirability of people wanting to come to those areas.

?What we have in front of us is a balance, it is proper, it is going to take us to what we have been working towards and I think this achieves the goal we, as Council are trying to do, which is allow the community within those stable neighbourhoods to grow and evolve, but be appropriate developments.?