

Aurora ?failed to manage expectations? on Highland Gate park: Councillor

By Brock Weir

Aurora failed to manage the public's expectations when it came to the development of a 21 acre piece of parkland in the heart of the former Highland Gate Golf Course, according to Councillor Michael Thompson.

Or, according to Mayor Geoff Dawe, there was a ?bit of a process breakdown.?

However one characterises it, one thing is clear: the issue of illuminated trails shone a light on a multitude of frustrations around the Council table last week.

Discussions became heated over plans to install lights along a significant trail link through the park, an item included in the binding minutes of settlement between the Town, Highland Gate Developments Inc, and the Highland Gate Ratepayers Association.

According to Parks and Recreation Manager Al Downey, the illuminated trail is set to be the standard for new trails throughout Aurora but facing significant backlash from many area residents, Councillors were left asking how the lights got into the plan and what they can do about it.

The answer to the last question was very little as Councillors were told the Town does not have the right to change any of the terms in the minutes of settlement without the consent of the developers or the ratepayers.

But it led to a third question: if Aurora can't unilaterally make changes on the minutes of settlement, why were meetings held to solicit public opinion on options that could not be amended?

?I think maybe there is a bit of a process breakdown,? said Mayor Geoff Dawe on the unanimous vote from the Town's Trails & Active Transportation Committee against lights along the trail, well after the Minutes of Settlement were signed. ?It puts them between a rock and a hard place asking them to comment on something they have no authority to change. I support what is on the floor because, as per our solicitor, we do not have the authority to unilaterally change the Minutes of Settlement. We're one of the parties in a three party contract and I think it is incumbent upon us to uphold our end of the agreement and to move on and trust our staff will come up with an acceptable solution.?

A similar view was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson, who said the Town ?failed to manage expectations? on the input process.

To that end, some Councillors objected to the park's concept designs even being on the agenda above and beyond a simple receipt for information if the biggest bone of contention was already a done deal.

Questioning the merit of the public open house all together, Councillor Tom Mrakas said the whole exercise was pointless ? the same as staff asking for their approval.

?We have heard time and time again that we don't have the authority, so I am looking at the motion that is in front of us and it is asking us to approve something that has already been approved,? he said. ?We have already heard that this design was already approved in the minutes of settlement, so therefore, if we don't have the authority to oppose this then this is ultra vires.?

From Councillor Sandra Humfries' perspective, a note of sympathy should be directed to the developer because the Town is ?forcing? the developer on the lighting issue.

?They want us to adhere to it because we don't want to open the Minutes of Settlement,? she said. ?We don't want that to happen, we want to just move on and do what we need to do.?

So, what does Aurora need to do?

While lawmakers were told that the lights are going in ? despite objections from Council and residents alike ? due to them being in the minutes of settlement, there is still room for ?creativity? in minimizing their impacts as much as possible.

?I think we should get away from the Minutes of Settlement,? said Councillor John Abel. ?There is nothing we can do about that. Let's move forward with what is acceptable and can be agreed upon and work with our developer to move forward. I think what they are proposing is fantastic for the development.

?This park will be something like an arboretum. It will be a treasure as it grows into the design and going forward and we can work with the residents, especially the ones who are impacted, on mitigating and minimizing any of those impacts because we have been allowed that, and our Parks department will be able to react. It is our role to move forward and get that done and let's move on with it. It is just a conceptual design at this stage.?

According to Mr. Downey, lighting this significant trail is a ?step toward what we feel is a service level that at least Council would like to explore.?

?Many people talk about lighting late at night,? he said, ?but when you're walking home from school at 5 on a winter's evening on

that trail it is dark. You would hope that it would be lit if it was used for that purpose and, if it is not lit, then it will not be used for that purpose and they will be walking elsewhere. We are doing our very best to try and create our trails to be an active transportation network as Council has asked us to do and this is one of those steps towards that.?

While Council might not be able to remove the lights, they voted to remove exercise equipment and picnic tables from the concept plan, which will be ratified this week.