

Aurora signs off on Highland Gate redevelopment settlement

By Brock Weir

Council endorsed a settlement mediated by the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) on the redevelopment of the former Highland Gate golf course in a 6-3 vote on Wednesday night.

The decision came after lengthy closed door talks with Councillors Wendy Gaertner, Tom Mrakas and Jeff Thom voting against the deal.

At this point, the details of the deal will not be disclosed until the minutes of the settlement are formally signed off on by all parties, but ratepayers came to a similar decision on Tuesday night.

Highland Gate Redevelopments Inc. previously came to Council with a proposal for a 184 unit redevelopment of the golf course lands, as well as a 10 storey condominium complex close to Yonge Street. Council did not approve this initial proposal and the developers initiated a hearing at the OMB to get a final decision.

Emotions ran high around the Council table as lawmakers explained their decision without being able to wade into the details of just what they had endorsed. All nine members may have differed in how they arrived at their final conclusion, but there was one common refrain: dissatisfaction.

First to speak against the settlement was Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said endorsing the plan meant the Town's Official Plan was not worth the paper it was written on.

"This piece of property is unique to this town," said Councillor Mrakas. "To me, and many people in this Town, it is a historically and culturally significant landscape within this Town and we're losing something special. Many residents are not in favour of this and I think many of them have been beaten into submission and have given up, and I think that is the point we're at. It is a tough decision to make: where does it end? Where do we stop? To me, this sets a dangerous precedent moving forward.

"We should not be forced to make amendments to our official plan unless we feel it is an exceptional plan and, to me, this is not an exceptional plan," he added, noting the land in question is presently designated parkland and open space. "This takes away, for me, the guts of this community, and I am frustrated."

Council, he said, "could have done more" from the very beginning and wished he had "said more" from the outset.

Councillors Gaertner and Thom were brief in stating their cases against the deal.

"I was elected and I ran to be the voice of the people in the community, and to represent our residents and do what is in the best interest of the Town of Aurora," said Councillor Thom. "I do not think this is in the best interests of the Town and its residents."

Added Councillor Gaertner: "In my opinion, this is not right for the residents. I am very disappointed and I believe this is a sad day for the Town of Aurora."

Even those voting in favour of the settlement shared a sense of "disappointment." Dabbing away tears while speaking to the issue, Councillor Sandra Humfries said she too wished she had said more, despite voting for the settlement in the end.

"At the very beginning of this entire process I knew exactly where I stood and at the beginning of the process I thought this was just not the right thing to do for our community," she said. "At the very beginning of this, we were asked "and thankfully all did the same" to not speak out on our perspectives because it could jeopardize what was going on. I respected that and continue to respect that. In doing so, I feel personally that I let the residents down because they didn't know where I stood.

"I wish we could be able to express ourselves in the manner we're supposed to make in every critical case that comes to us and we respect our guidelines. I think we put ourselves in a very poor position. We learned information we will not be sharing until it is the right time and because of that, and because I do want to make sure that those residents are protected, I will be supporting this tonight."

This has been an "arduous" journey, said Councillor Kim, conceding it was an "emotional" decision. Each Council member, he said, has friends, acquaintance and, of course, constituents impacted by the deal, but he said he believes Council needs to be "aligned" with the decision made earlier in the week by "the other stakeholders."

"Let's be clear: from my interpretation, at the very beginning when we found out about the original plan, we were all against any development in that area because we all shared the uniqueness of that area," he said. "Hindsight is 20/20 in terms of the process and how it all unfolded, but over the last year or so, as we go from one step to the other, it became more evident that our desired outcome was unlikely to unfold the way we wanted it to unfold. Certainly I am as upset as everyone else, and our OP is not worth the paper it is written on. Based on what we know and based on how everything unfolded, it became quite clear the desired outcome was not going to happen."

As Councillor John Abel said this was "not the outcome" he wanted, he said he voted in favour "with regret."

"We started this when we handed out fliers for the ratepayers association and worked in a coordinated effort and that was the last time we did," he said. "We have since moved all in our own direction and once we got to mediation basically the table was set. We have now arrived and I am supporting because it is what I believe is the best decision. Could we have done better? Oh, yes. Could we have done it differently? Oh, yes."

"We're here, we don't want to lay blame on anyone, but to me it was sort of like a lot of chefs cooking and this is the meal we've got. It is the best we can do under the circumstances."

Noting he understood the concerns of his fellow members, Councillor Paul Pirri said explaining his rationale for voting in favour of the settlement will be easier in a few weeks when the details of the deal could be elaborated on, a view shared by Councillor Michael Thompson who said now was not the right time to speak to the whys.

"I think we all share the same belief that there have been issues with the process, but we are where we are today," said Councillor Thompson. "I will be supporting the motion in front of us. We have had multiple experts speak to us, we have had legal advice, and at this point I believe it is the best choice."

Mayor Geoff Dawe also spoke highly of the support and assistance Aurora received throughout the process in helping them come to a decision.

"The thinking sometimes is all decisions are easy. We have been working on this for a long time and it is not an easy decision for anyone sitting at the table," he said. "I quite appreciate that because our job is to look at it and some of us differ dramatically on this and how we feel it reflects what we were elected to do with respect to the Town of Aurora. "We can always do things differently and we can always do things better, but I think we have done it respectfully. At times, quite frankly, I think that has been a challenge."

"Think this is an opportunity to be a little more diligent in how some of those things come forward and see how we can approach them differently. It may not seem to us that we have done it, but I do believe we have followed a good process, perhaps not a particularly satisfying process, but I do believe we have done it with the support of our staff and we have made the best decision we can make at this particular time given the circumstances."