

Ballard made real difference, readers contend

As the municipal election day approaches on Monday, October 22, we, the undersigned, would like to remind Aurora residents about how our Mayor and Town Council left the residents of the Highland Gate community to fight alone for the protection we quite reasonably expected from Aurora's Official Plan.

The Highland Gate Ratepayers Association was forced to defend the Town's Official Plan without the financial and expert support the Town could have provided. Through residents' generous support, over \$182,500 was raised to hire legal and planning expertise of our own.

Where were our elected officials?

The first Highland Community Ratepayers Association had succeeded on a previous occasion to limit redevelopment of the historic Aurora Highlands golf course. It secured what it believed were conditions and a commitment that would give the Town and neighbouring residents future influence over re-development of the course. Residents of the community have since learned how reliant they were on the Mayor and Town Council of the day being a faithful partner, and how vulnerable they would become ? and remain ? when it was not.

As golf course attendance declined and eagerness to develop land already in use grew, the owners of the course initiated a plan of development.

The 2014-2018 Council, which included three of the current mayoral candidates (John Abel, Geoff Dawe, and Tom Mrakas) and four other Councillors seeking re-election, did not respond to the developer's proposal by the legal deadline, providing an easy and fast track for appeal to the OMB.

The Council and Town staff did not uphold our Official Plan during the development proposal period and choose not to stand with residents during the OMB mediation session. Residents fought alone, without the support of the Council. Residents had to pay for the expensive legal and planning reviews themselves. The Council votes cast at the Mediation settlement were, by then, no longer decisive in the outcome.

Ask these Councillors and Mayoral Candidates: Why didn't they uphold our Official Plan when it counted during the public meetings and at the Highland Gate Development OMB hearing?

Our then-MPP, Chris Ballard said this at the time: ?I believe the Town has the tools on hand to work constructively with whomever owns the property in the future.? And ?As a resident of Aurora, I look to Council to provide us with the leadership necessary to have responsible ownership in that area.? (The Auroran, Nov 20, 2014 p 7). Mr. Ballard pushed for fair treatment of residents by the development company, and did not back down from that position.

After many years of complaints from many ratepayers groups, environmental groups and public officials across Ontario, the provincial government began studying changes to the OMB process. As part of the public review process, the HGRPA submitted comments to the Province of Ontario Environmental Bill of Rights Registry. The Association of Municipalities Ontario, (AMO) which represents all municipalities across the province, including Aurora, also submitted a proposal to the Province. And, as our MPP, Chris Ballard pushed this process forward to support his Aurora neighbours, constituents and environmental groups across the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Ted McMeekin, former Minister of Municipal Affairs for Ontario, has told us he was pressed publicly and privately by MPP Ballard to institute reforms. He says: ?Chris was a strong advocate for Ontario Municipal Board reform and his input was valued. I know he came to Queen's Park after being an Aurora Town Councillor wanting to reform the OMB, and he was successful. Chris was a great advocate for the people of Aurora. It was clear he put their interests first.?

Claims are being made by the Mayor and Town Council members seeking re-election about their positive role in the Highland gate settlement agreement. Neither the incumbent Mayor nor Town Council members distinguished themselves by being especially influential in achieving OMB reform. Certainly none of them played the significant role of Chris Ballard, who as our MPP and member of the Ontario cabinet, advocated and voted for the passage of the new law. Chris Ballard was the one elected official from Aurora who made a meaningful difference.

Here in Town, it was residents working through the HGRPA, without the help of the incumbent Mayor or Town Councillors, who succeeded in negotiating:

? a community park with amenities

? public consultation with members of the residents group affected by the park plan

? additional natural areas throughout the proposed development, with trails increased by 72%

? all R1 and R2 bylaws regarding setbacks and building restrictions to adhere to town standards for our community
? buffer areas adjacent to the rear yards and roadways, and more

Due to its elevation and environmental features, the area now referred to as Community Park was never to be developed with housing, and, in any event, would have remained green space. Unfortunately, we had no choice with the changes to the ponds. It is Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Area's policy to take all ponds in the region offline and return the stream flow to its natural course, restore and naturalize the stream shoreline for local species.

We want to set the record straight that the incumbent Mayor and Town Councillors did nothing at the most critical moment of the process ? at the very beginning, they chose to do nothing.

We'd also like to remind our fellow residents that the journey to complete the Highland Gate development is far from over. In this Aurora election, residents, when they cast their votes, should consider carefully who is most likely to consider their interests and defend their rights in the years ahead.

Aurora residents should vote for someone who stood by them and has proven capable of achieving what they attempt, even when keeping that commitment is challenging and can come with consequences.

Chris Ballard has our vote!

Catherine Marshall
Graham Batchelor
Susan Walmer
Paul Simpson
Laura-Mae & Robert Cook
Scott Parry
Patricia Parry
David Parry