

?How did it get this far?? ask Highland Gate residents



By Brock Weir

They might have come at the proposal from different angles, but over a dozen residents who stepped up to the microphone at a public planning meeting last week were united in their opposition to a developers' plan to transform the defunct Highland Gate Golf Course into a residential infill development.

Backed by an audience of hundreds who weren't reserved in their applause, the residents spoke out about a number of concerns they had about the plan going forward including compatibility within the existing neighbourhood as well as traffic and environmental impacts.

According to consultants appearing before Council, a number of tweaks and revisions have been made to the plan to address concerns taken in from residents and Councillors alike over the course of the summer, and, so far 107 of the 200 households backing onto the golf course land had been contacted over the plan.

?The process has been to meet with them directly, along with the owners' representatives, the architect has attended, engineers have attended,? said Don Given, a consultant retained by Geranium Developments to lead this process. ?In some cases, grading was an issue and they have come back with very specific proposals for each property that are captured in those agreements to show how the interface would take place in the future.

?All of those agreements that we have out there are predicated on getting approval from the municipality. Should we not get approval from the municipality for the plan we are seeking, we don't know what that means to us. We don't know whether we're talking a different plan or where that takes us, but we are committing to those changes on the assumption this plan will, in some form, be approved by Council.?

Residents speaking out, however, were not so sure.

?This land is not just a picture on a map, it is a living entity,? said area resident Lorraine Coens. ?Perhaps we made a bad gamble, we who decided to build our homes, our lives, really, along this protected stretch of designated greenbelt. Yes, life is full of gambles, isn't it? Now, hundreds of us, residents of this Highland Gate neighbourhood, just might have made the same bad gamble when we chose to live here. But, perhaps Club Link may not have made such a bad gamble.

?Sure, their golf course failed, but no matter. Just have the land rezoned and developed and the losses will then be recouped and then some. Simple solution. Really, the gamble we have made lies with those whom we have elected to the esteemed positions of authority in Aurora, those who will be tasked with deciding the on the proposal concerning the designated greenbelt. We Canadians are so quick to point our fingers and censure other countries who deforest their lands and otherwise desecrate the environment. All too often, nature does not have a spokesperson before it is too late. Is Aurora a good place to make a stand for the environment??

Jean Fraser, a resident of the area for over 25 years, brought with her the Town of Aurora's own policies to underscore her opposition. Backing onto the golf course land was a prime motivator in her moving to the area, she said, and infilling the land with further homes is against the fundamentals of Aurora's official plan, she contended, particularly points pertaining to building greener communities and protecting stable neighbourhoods.

"I can only wonder: how did it get this far?" said Ms. Fraser to applause from the crowd. "It does not in any way resemble the stable community they have lived in for 25 years. I urge Mayor and Council to have the foresight and vision to honour the intent of this vision [in the Official Plan] statement and reject this application. You have the opportunity to act in a green and responsible manner. In fact, it is your duty to do so."

Some neighbours rejected the idea put forward by the developers that the land in question is land that had "lost its usefulness." Others spoke out about one-sided roads that could pop up in their back yards, buffer zones between existing lots and new units, and the safety of children and potential "invasions of privacy" each area could entail. They also rejected the idea the proposed 10-storey condo could be considered an extension of the Aurora Promenade plan.

Local trails advocate Klaus Wehrenberg reiterated his position that Highland Gate is an unprecedented opportunity establish an "amazing linear public park" that would entail a greenway to connect east to west, while Chris Neal questioned whether the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA) had fully considered all the implications of approving this proposal.

"The number of people here reinforces my idea this is a wonderful town to live in," said Doug Bushy, an Aurora resident living outside the Highland Gate area. "We're not against development, but we're against overdevelopment. When you see proposals come in that offer to neighbours: you have a wonderful street at the front of your house, we're going to provide you with a driveway out of the back of your house as well, it is ludicrous to have streets on both sides of your house. That is like an island. We're not against development, but these are stable neighbourhoods."