

Info will let Aurora take 'strong position' on Highland Gate: Gaertner

By Brock Weir

Few dispute the adage that knowledge is power, but for Councillor Wendy Gaertner, this is particularly true when it comes to Aurora and the possibility an Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) hearing on the proposed redevelopment of Highland Gate Golf Course.

Council approved a motion from Councillor Gaertner last week calling for all the information on the history and evolution of the defunct golf club to be laid bare before Council and the public alike to enable the municipality to take a 'position of strength' over the issue.

In her lengthy motion, Councillor Gaertner said it is 'right and prudent' for Council to ensure the public planning process is comprehensive, transparent and fair, and it is the Town's role to ensure 'Facts are known and understood by all interested parties' without compromising the process.

In particular, the motion seeks out clarification on one particularly hot-button issue for Highland Gate residents: the one-foot buffers surrounding the former golf course lands retained by the Town of Aurora when the existing housing development was built around the golf course.

Residents have repeatedly called for more information on the purpose of these buffers, questioning whether they can be used to halt or limit development, but reports from Aurora's solicitor have strongly suggested they cannot. However, that is a view residents have objected to as late as the October Public Planning meeting devoted to Highland Gate.

'It is therefore important to know what the common understanding and agreed upon purpose of these buffers were associated with the first development and the subsequent additional re-development of the land and their significance to the municipality, the public, and all the affected property holders,' Councillor Gaertner motioned, adding information coming forward should include all reports and correspondence the Town has had on the matter, including reports from experts, a review of newspaper articles about 'any and all developments' related to the land over its evolution, a public notice asking for anyone with first-hand knowledge on the buffers to come forward with 'historical information', and a report from external legal counsel to put the buffers into their proper context.

'The intent of this motion is to provide important information to Council and the residents that will enable Aurora to take a strong position at the OMB or enable us to negotiate from a position of strength with respect to an alternative planning proposal,' she told her Council colleagues last week.

The motion passed on an 8-1 vote, with Councillor Paul Pirri being the lone dissenting voice.

'I think a lot of the elements that are being sought have been found,' he said. 'I don't think it is the best use of staff's time to be looking through old newspaper articles.'

Councillor Gaertner, however, said this information is readily available from residents.

And residents came out in droves to support the motion last week 'or, at the very least, encourage Council to take a strong stand against the development.

'This will inform Council and the public as we move forward in the negotiation process of the history and the past applications in this area,' said Aurora resident Susan Walmer, who also serves as the Executive Director of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust. 'Although an OMB hearing has been triggered by (developer) Geranium and (property owner) ClubLink, and it is their democratic right to do so, I would strongly encourage the Council to process through the two streams that happen at the OMB process: negotiation and preparing for an OMB hearing. It is my hope that the negotiation process can continue. I am very hopeful and optimistic we will be able to work through those issues as well.'

Added environmentalist Klaus Wehrenberg: 'The Town's lawyer, in his opinion on the significance of such reserves, emphasizes

that [they] cannot be used to stop development. However, nowhere is there an opinion that such reserve is a signal from the Councils of the 1980s that Highland Gate lands deserve special attention on behalf of the Aurora public when it comes to land use changes. It is for that reason that the reserves' purposes have to be on the table, so that they can receive appropriate consideration.?

Highland Gate resident Lorraine Coens, who has been a very vocal opponent of the redevelopment plans throughout the public planning process, reiterated her concerns at the podium as well.

?We all have our own reasons for consternation with the proposed development, but let us consolidate our efforts to stop any development on this property and file this proposal where it belongs: under the heading 'Bad Ideas,'? said Ms. Coens. ?I would hope that you would fight for the rights of your Aurora constituents at the OMB hearings and, in doing so, we residents will feel confident in voting for you in future elections. I strongly urge Council to research documents and minutes of meetings at the time frame [in which the reserves were established]. I am hopeful that you will act on behalf of all the citizens of Aurora to protect this land.?