

POLITICS AS USUAL: Ratepayers Groups

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

With the closure of the Highland Gate Golf Club, residents in the neighbourhood have banded together to form a ratepayers group in order to ensure access to, and equal dissemination, of all relevant information that may impact their community.

There's been a bit of odd misinformation floating about concerning how or why, or even who can form a ratepayers group. I have been asked a lot of questions about the process of forming a group, so I think a bit of clarity is in order.

First, what is a ratepayer? In the most general sense, a ratepayer is someone who pays local rates. This is generally construed to be local taxes. The Oxford English Dictionary expands the definition a bit to state that a ratepayer is one who ??pays for a utility service and especially electricity according to established rates.?

A ratepayer association then is defined by most municipalities as, ?? an organization formed by a group of people residing in a defined area who have come together to address issues within their boundaries of representation and act as one voice for their particular group and/or area.?

In other words, residents who live in a particular neighbourhood or community area can form a group to ensure their local interests are identified and addressed. A ratepayer group can be formal ? and registered ? or less formal and not registered. But, both can speak for the people within their group and their respective community.

Generally, these types of groups ?

registered or non-registered ? are formed when there is a particular issue of concern within the immediate community. The concern is most often a proposed development ? such as a high rise in the middle of a residential neighbourhood. Sometimes it can be about speeding. Or Train whistles. Or any number of things that may be cause for concern for residents.

In the case of the Highland Gate Golf Course Community Group, it appears that as there is no immediate issue. The group has been formed in an effort to be proactive rather than reactive. The only known piece of information is that the golf course is closed. That's all. No plans for development have been submitted.

However, there are obvious concerns about what could happen given what happened in Newmarket and the protracted, and ultimately losing, battle here in Aurora regarding the Westhill property. Thus, the proactive formation of a ratepayers group is sensible. It allows residents to be involved from the outset rather than later in the process when decisions have already been made. Ratepayer groups afford residents a means of access to the planning process. It allows them to be kept informed. The executive can act as a conduit of information for the residents, or as an advocate on their behalf. The group can delegate to Council and make the affected residents' views known. These are all positives.

There is some confusion about who can form a ratepayers group and how complex and legalistic it is. Rest assured, it's really not a complicated process. If a group of people are united in a concern, they can get together and form an association. If they want to formalize that association, they simply go to the Town Hall, get the necessary forms, get at least 10 ? 20 signatures from folks who want to join, elect a board of executives at a public meeting, set the boundaries, then submit the completed forms to the Town Clerk for ratification.

That's it. You don't need a phalanx of lawyers to form a committee. Actually, that would defeat the whole purpose of these groups. They are supposed to be accessible. That means anyone can join and anyone can lead. All it takes is time and commitment to doing the work necessary on behalf of their neighbours.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is - after all - Our Town.

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