

?Shame on us,? says Gaertner following Stable Neighbourhoods fight

By Brock Weir

When the word ?shame? rings out in Council chambers, it is usually from residents who have felt their voices were not heard by local lawmakers.

This word, however, was voiced by one of their own last week near the end of a vote on protecting Aurora's Stable Neighbourhoods.

Heated words were exchanged last week after Council voted down an amendment from Councillor Wendy Gaertner that would have seen numbers used by a consultant to come up with a series of zoning bylaw amendment recommendations retooled to exclude a pocket of 75 homes on Temperance Street from the equation -- an inclusion some felt skewed the results.

Council rejected the amendment on a 4 - 3 vote, with Mayor Tom Mrakas, and Councillors Rachel Gilliland, Harold Kim and Michael Thompson voting against it.

?There have been a lot of things I haven't understood about this process to make our zoning bylaws reflect our Official Plan,? said Councillor Gaertner. ?It seems so easy, it seems like it just should have happened so easily. The residents should not have had to fight for this. The planning department should have brought it forward when we looked at our comprehensive zoning bylaw. That didn't happen. The residents took it on. Why did it take so long to get the report to Council? Why do we have charts that say two different things and we don't have any explanation for the consultant? Why does Council expect to make a decision when they don't have the explanation of how the consultant came up to this conclusion?

?Council needs complete and transparent information. We didn't have that. We're now at the very end of this chain and this decision will affect thousands of residents, the quality of a lot of lives. It is going to change the face of our community and if I was the residents, I would be saying, ?Go back to the drawing board, look at all the neighbourhoods separately. Do it right.' This is a change that is going to happen forever to this Town. The residents are sitting here and we don't give them one concession? I say shame on this Council and shame on the whole process that has hit so many roadblocks in the way of these residents. We have a very small group here tonight and that is because most of the residents have given up. They're frustrated. I will remind you that many of us on Council during the election said we would protect these residents. We have not provided them with one protection that they asked for. Again, shame on us.?

Councillor Rachel Gilliland,
however, was among the Council members who vocally disagreed with her colleague's suggestion that Council hadn't responded to residents' concerns.

?To suggest that we haven't really done anything, I disagree with,? she said. ?Maybe in the previous terms we haven't, as Council, done what we should. Yes, we did run on campaigns protecting stable neighbourhoods. This issue has certainly been a hot, hot topic and a very defining one for our neighbourhoods. We have heard a lot of strong opinions from both sides for and against. Finding a balance between the two will never be a perfect science or a perfect math, but we must stand together and make a decision to do something before it is too late, as we approach yet another building season.

?Here we are today faced with the same opportunity to make a positive change now. My fear is if we keep trying to please everyone it will never happen and monster homes will still be built overshadowing our small homes, blocking sun and losing the privacy we so much enjoy. We cannot deny that new homes have been torn down in the past 13 years... It is important that we include them in these changing neighbourhoods as they are now part of that neighbourhood. It is not fair to exclude them. What we're trying to focus on is mitigating these monster homes in scale and harmonizing a traditional balance while maintaining character.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas also took exception to Councillor Gaertner's comments.

?I know exactly what each and every one of you said,? said Mayor Mrakas, touching upon her reference to campaign platforms. ?I know what I said, and I said it was a three prong approach we need to take: we need to implement site plan applications for single dwelling homes, we need to make some changes to the zoning to meet the intent of the OP (Official Plan), which I think we are doing, and lastly, we need to implement design guidelines and that is what we're doing. I think this will better protect our stable neighbourhoods and bring it in line with our OP.?

Although Councillor John Gallo supported Councillor Gaertner's initial motion, he ultimately said it was time to move forward.

?Was it the best process we took? Probably not, but I guess we have learned from it,? he said. ?Are we as close as we could have gotten? Probably. Would I have done some things differently? I think so. Can this be tweaked? I also think it can. I agree with Councillor Thompson and others that a more comprehensive look at them to see whether or not there are some areas we can perhaps remove, but I am all in favour of moving forward, putting this behind us and getting it done.?