

Tempers flare over Highland Gate redevelopment



By Brock Weir

Whether it is a ?travesty? or an ?inevitability?, the proposed redevelopment of Highland Gate Golf Course raised more than eyebrows last week as hundreds of angry residents filled Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

Tempers flared as neighbours lined up to sound off against the proposed plan to transform the former golf course into a new residential development of nearly 150 homes, plus a large park area and trail extensions, demanding Council ?kill? the project while it is still in its early stages.

If the plan becomes a reality, these homes will be built throughout the golf course area, which is largely lined with homes, resulting in existing homes facing streets and further units in their back yards.

?Once that space is gone, it's gone,? said one man, a resident of the Highland Gate condominium, speaking against the inflow of traffic into the neighbourhood, and a plan to build a 10-storey condo unit near Yonge Street.

?What we're really trying to do is hold onto something that is important to us and our families, and that is space to walk, to ride our bikes, to walk our dogs. It is important to us we hold onto [this quality of life]. It is a Town we love and we want to stay in, and we don't want to see it become big buildings and lots of congestion.?

Noting concerns of the surrounding neighbourhood were Cheryl Shindruk, Executive Vice President of Land Development for Geranium Corporation, a company which has partnered with landowner ClubLink to redevelop the course, and consultants, landscape architects, and traffic experts retained by the group to guide the process.

?From the outset, we wanted to design a plan that reflected the character of the community that is already there,? said Ms. Shindruk. ?It is obviously a lovely community and a lovely neighbourhood and we wanted our lots and homes to fit into the community and enhance what is already there. We know it is a tight, neighbourly situation so, from the outset, we also knew buffering and sensitivity to your properties is paramount and important to us.?

To further this plan, the partnership has retained the services of Don Given of Malone Given Parsons, a consultant that has helped steer many developments in the Aurora area. Addressing the crowds, he said extensive work had gone into preparing the plan, accounting for the fact this redevelopment is, essentially, set to take place right in their backyards.

An important thing for residents to consider, he said, were provincial development guidelines which call for intensification on existing lands to halt urban sprawl. This project is typical in achieving those goals, he said, particularly in ?reusing lands that have lost their useful purpose.?

These statements didn't wash with the residents, however, particularly the view this redevelopment would be an ?enhancement.?

'I have spoken to people that will soon have, instead of green all around them, a road down one side [of their property] and down the other,' said resident Chris McGowan. 'It is difficult to think of that as enhancing the area.'

Mr. McGowan was not alone in his criticism over the street layouts in the proposed plan, with similar views offered by many of his counterparts.

In response, Ms. Shindruk said the rights of way are 'sized to meet' municipal standards, and these will be up for further review at Town Hall.

'We coexist tightly with our neighbours, and that is why we want to do what we can to buffer the relationship between the new and existing.'

Pressed by other neighbours for examples of where Geranium had carried out similar redevelopment projects on golf courses, Ms. Shindruk said this was a first for them on this type of land, but she and Mr. Given pointed to Newmarket's Glenway redevelopment as an example of where it had been done elsewhere.

'Each site is unique [and has its] own set of challenges,' said Ms. Shindruk. 'We're obliged to conduct ourselves in a way that is appropriate for the conditions of the site.'

The Glenway comparison though did not sit well with the Highland Gate neighbours.

'This is a form of development that is unusual,' said Mr. Given. 'We're not trying to hide that, but it is the only thing you can do when you have the tight arrangement of these fairways and we're trying to minimize the impact on the existing community. The reuse of the golf course is inevitable. It is private land. It has its rights to go through an approval process.'

As the audience balked at the argument that the redevelopment was an inevitability, some turned to local leaders for some answers. In attendance were Mayor Geoff Dawe and nearly all Aurora Councillors. Addressing the crowds at the start of the meeting, Mayor Dawe said he and Council were there to listen to their concerns 'to get a sense of where we want to go.'

'We appreciate this is an emotional issue and we want to work with you to make sure whatever happens, happens in the best interests of everyone who is here tonight,' he said.

As far as most of the audience was concerned, however, what was in their best interests was a far cry from the plan projected onto the screen.

'I am not sure I really buy the [intensification argument],' said another man. '146 houses isn't going to make much of a dint in the additional 20,000 [the province] wants in Aurora. It sounds like a sweet, easy target. For 146 houses, you are going to wipe out basically the style of living we bought into in the golf club area.'

Added Aurora-resident Cyndy Skillins, who attended the meeting to speak on behalf of her mother-in-law, who lives in the Highland Gate area: 'I know you guys (the developers) have done a lot of work, but when you take the number of houses, the number of people, the number of lots that have made Aurora a really good and amazing community, how can you turn around and not give either consideration or compensation for what we are going to go through in the property loss we're going to have, 20 acres of parks does not equate to what everyone has gone through. This is a travesty to what Aurora stood for.'

'What you're talking about to me sounds like Wonder Bread. You have taken everything out from the nutrition of wheat, put a little back in and call it 'enriched.' It really is not for the people who are living here.'