

Calls for greater municipal planning powers renewed but bill won't impact Highland Gate

By Brock Weir

Aurora renewed calls last week for greater influence on local planning matters from the Province of Ontario, but if a bill making its way through the Legislature ultimately passes, it will have little impact on development plans already in the works – including the redevelopment of Highland Gate Golf Course.

This was the advice offered to Council by Town Solicitor Warren Mar when members deliberated recommendations to send a clear message to the Province's Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing – endorsing restoring more decision-making authority for municipalities on local planning matters, and limiting the influence of the Ontario Municipal Board, essentially granting municipalities more powers to manage the demands caused by growth and intensification.

This recommendation was coupled with an amendment from Councillor John Abel drafting a letter from all Council members asking MPP Chris Ballard and his colleagues in the Legislature to support Bill 73, which would do just that.

“Residents are counting on their elected officials to make decisions in the best interests of their local community,” said Councillor Abel. “We have a Council that can make decisions which can then be appealed to the OMB.”

This is particularly important, he said, when looking at intensification within existing communities such as Highland Gate, but Mr. Mar said he didn't expect the passage of the bill to have any impact “at all” on current development applications like these, and there would likely be grandfathering provisions in whatever ultimately comes forward.

That being said, however, Councillors agreed many communities are dealing with situations like the Highland Gate redevelopment and submitting comments to the Province shows that municipalities like Aurora are not content with the status quo and the belief there is ample room for improvement.

“Things like Bill 73, while they are good for us and they are a good step forward in trying to restore some of the ability of Council and the Municipality to have some say, its impact on the current application is very unlikely,” said Councillor Michael Thompson. “I can't see the Province backdating the legislation when it comes into effect because it would affect so many municipalities.”

Councillor Thompson addressed his comments to a large contingent of Highland Gate residents in the audience at last week's Council meeting, as did Councillor Harold Kim.

“We will best represent your voices in the public planning process [and] hear both sides,” said Councillor Kim. “We have to be united and go with one voice, instead of having the potential haphazard way of going about things. I am feeling optimistic and I am hoping everything will just play with the process, work together, and look for cooperating on both sides.”

But, the legislation can pave the way for a better process down the road.

“It is important to note that this [Bill] is in draft to come out in 2016, so a lot of this is speculative,” said Mayor Geoff Dawe of possible provisions that might be in the final draft.

Added Councillor Paul Pirri: “I would have liked to have seen this bill do a little bit more to give Councils more of a say of what can go on in their municipality, but this is what we have got at this point. It is not the best thing in the world, but I don't think it will meet York Region's needs going forward, but this is what the Province is willing to give us at this point in time.”

From Councillor Thompson's perspective, the very fact the Bill is in draft form underlines the importance of why it is important to speak up now.

?Hopefully they take these comments and they make those changes so [the bill] does go far enough,? he said. ?I know they are looking at a review of the OMB in the fall, and I know we would all like to see it sooner rather than later, and if more municipalities send in the same comments, hopefully the Province listens.?