

Common ground needed to address golf course redevelopments: Councillors

By Brock Weir

Golf course redevelopment, as anyone in Newmarket can tell you, is not simply an Aurora issue but Aurora could be at the forefront in developing a proactive, united approach to situations that might crop up in the future.

Aurora Councillors are proposing the Town host a summit, open to all municipalities from across Ontario to identify common issues and principles on the 'appropriate' redevelopment of former golf courses, such as Highland Gate, that are in stable neighbourhoods.

Brought forward by Councillors Michael Thompson and Tom Mrakas, a summit would be a 'proactive' way to examine municipalities that are facing 'continuing challenges' to the development principles set out in their own official plans.

'It is coming to an agreement on certain frameworks in terms of official plans and the conformity to stable neighbourhoods,' says Councillor Thompson. 'Part of the initial summit is that fact-finding mission to talk to some of the other municipalities and [identify common themes]. For the most part, it seems we all struggle with the same issues in that we develop these official plans and yet these golf course redevelopments are outside of that looking for some amendments.'

'It is challenging to put it into stable neighbourhoods or conformance to the neighbourhoods around that, so can we not develop a better policy or framework to deal with this so everybody, at the end of the day, feels like they are adding to a solution?'

It is all about finding proactive approaches, he adds, and Councillor Mrakas says he agrees it is possible to hash out a solution that works for everyone.

'While we feel that not every development of a golf course within each community is the same, and there is a uniqueness to each community, there are similarities on how development would occur,' says Councillor Mrakas. 'Instead of fighting these battles individually, we think it is a good idea for all of us to get together. As a group, we are stronger in coming up with a policy that can lay the groundwork as far as any future redevelopment of any golf courses within any communities in Ontario.'

'I don't think anyone is anti-development or pro-development, it is more about responsible development and something that fits within each community on its own. We all have a unique style and way the community works and we want to hold onto it. Developers coming in and taking up every last bit of green space, golf courses especially, and just cramming it with housing and saying they are fulfilling the provincial interest, I don't see how that is fulfilling the provincial interest and, at the end of the day, I think Aurora needs to take the lead and ensure that leadership in bringing everyone together to come up with a policy we are missing.'

Existing official plans, they say, are missing key policy statements on golf courses, and creating a specific policy geared just towards these developments is essential in moving forward so 'we don't have to continuously waste taxpayer money fighting the same battles in each municipality over and over again,' adds Councillor Mrakas.

For Councillor Thompson, however, change is twofold: identifying these plots of common ground, and having a united voice to advocate higher for change. Ultimately, he says, these developments are governed by the Planning Act and it is important to look at amendments and changes to the legislation.

'Once we, collectively, as municipalities, have a better understanding of where to go, you can then engage the Province in how we can work together to find a better way to deal with the golf course redevelopments, even something as simple as timing,' says Councillor Thompson. 'The Planning Act says it is a 120 day [window] and that is a fairly tight timeframe to deal with such significant applications like golf course redevelopment and dealing with a lot of land, a lot of homes, and a lot of issues. That constraint, by itself, is difficult to pull off.'

As The Auroran reported last month, a further motion from Councillor Mrakas will task Council with debating whether or not significant overhauls need to take place at the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) regarding its jurisdiction on planning applications that come before the municipality. This, he says, goes hand in hand, with what he hopes will be achieved at this summit.

?I have spoken to a few mayors and they are very interested in taking part in a summit such as this,? says Councillor Mrakas. ?They are glad Aurora has taken the lead and I think, at the end of the day, you always hear good leaders listen, but good leaders also act, and I think it is time Aurora takes action, especially when it comes to this type of redevelopment. I hope Council unanimously supports this.?

Added Councillor Thompson: ?Everybody seemed frustrated with the [Highland Gate] process as it was and my tendency is always [to ask] what we can learn from it and how we can make it better. While this motion and what comes out of it might not have any impact on our current situation, I think it is the right thing for us to do going forward. There are other golf courses in Town and that is not to say they will be developed, but you never know what the future holds. I think we need to get ahead of this, not just for Aurora, but for other municipalities.?