

Communication key for Highland Gate group amid rumours

By Brock Weir

As a question mark still hangs over the future of Aurora's Highland Gate Golf Course, surrounding neighbours hope their newly formed ratepayers group, and its leaders, can best communicate to provide some clarity when the time comes.

Approximately 200 residents living around the now-defunct golf course came out to Town Hall on Monday night to formally elect the executive of the tentatively-titled Highland Gate Ratepayers Association. The intent of the group is to provide a strong voice at the table to communicate on behalf of residents with landowner ClubLink, the Town of Aurora, and potential future developers of the land.

They anticipate further direction on potential land sales and development opportunities by the end of the month.

Elected to lead the group was Dave Newton, who secured the role of president against fellow candidate Martine Eliase. In Mr. Newton's view, Monday's meeting formed the Ratepayers Association's [RPA's] administrative committee and, further down the line, their full mandate and committees to tackle any variety of issues that may come up pertaining to the future of the course.

First and foremost was clearing the air on a number of rumours that have been swirling around the Highland Gate situation, particularly on social media.

As an agent in the entertainment industry based in Toronto and Los Angeles, Mr. Newton says his job has taught him the ability not to 'sweat the small stuff', to focus on the 'big picture', and to pick his battles, qualities he said in his pitch to residents would serve them well with him at the helm.

'When I talk about the day-to-day clutter and what can be distracting, it happens in all of our lives, but particularly in the last month-and-a-half where we were going down this road [with Highland],' he said. 'You hear it all the time about collusion, ulterior motives, hidden agendas, clandestine meetings. It is ridiculous and it slows us all down. I believe what I can bring to this table is the ability to keep us focused.'

He said the reason he got the ball rolling on this RPA in the first place was simply because it had to be done. As a resident on the course, he had a vested interest in its future, as did most people in the room, and the possibilities 'scared' him.

'I wanted to mobilize the community whereby we could create a singular galvanized voice where we could talk to whomever it was that will ultimately develop the course, or subsequently buy the course as an operator, and ultimately have that singular voice rather than a splintered voice, with no hidden agenda. That is, bottom line, what this initiative is about.'

'This is to keep us focused towards that ultimate goal of negotiating and securing the best possible outcome for all of us who have a vested interest in the golf course.'

A similar sentiment was offered by Ms. Eliase, who spoke to the ratepayers via video link. She too said she was upset when she heard the golf course was closing and also felt she had to do something. If she had been elected president, she said she had three top priorities: housing values, quality of life, and integrity of the neighbourhood.

As the National Director of Patient Engagement for an arm of Johnson & Johnson, she said she was well versed in dealing with various stakeholders, including multiple levels of government and communication is a key part of this. While change in the area might be inevitable, it is important to have that strong voice.

'We can't deny the fact ClubLink has a property and they can do what they want with it,' she said. 'They have a right to sell it, we can't prevent it, but we can have a voice at the table. We can have a seat at the table to make sure we influence the decisions that

they make, the process they use to make decisions, and we can make sure we can [provide input so] the best outcome possible can come.?

During Monday's meeting, residents sounded off on a number of issues including ensuring that all areas of the course are represented on the committee and ensuring there is a way to ensure all residents are kept in the loop.