

Consultant could provide 'objective' solution to Stable Neighbourhoods fight

By Brock Weir

It's a fight that has galvanized residents living in long-established neighbourhoods on both sides of the argument, and has spurred hours of debate from local lawmakers, but a consultant could provide an unbiased solution in the fight to preserve Aurora's so-called Stable Neighbourhoods.

This is the hope of Councillor Wendy Gaertner this week when she brings forward a motion calling for an experienced expert to wade into and weigh in on the debate.

'Council will be holding another Public Planning meeting about Stable Neighbourhoods [and] it would be helpful to have any information that would contribute to the decision-making process,' said Councillor Gaertner in her motion.

She calls for, 'a consultant, expert and experienced in development in mature residential neighbourhoods be hired to provide an information report for the public planning meeting.'

While the motion itself will be discussed at this week's Council meeting, it received an early vote of confidence from Mayor Geoff Dawe when Council members at the Committee level last Tuesday.

'I like the idea of a consultant because I think that will bring the objectivity to this discussion that has been missing,' said Mayor Dawe. 'I think the objectivity is the issue.'

The Mayor made his comments following an impassioned delegation to Council members from Peter Smith, a resident of one of the four areas identified by Council as a stable neighbourhood within Aurora.

Earlier this year, Council pinpointed the neighbourhoods of Regency Acres, Aurora Heights, the Heritage Conservation District, and the residential neighbourhood around Town Park as part of the Stable Neighbourhoods Study. The study was tasked with looking into the issue of infill and now new builds within these established neighbourhoods conformed to the area around them.

The study was spurred by a several residents who came forward to express their opposition to what they described as large 'Monster Homes' coming into their neighbourhood and demanding action.

A significant focus of the debate has been the discrepancy between the Town's Official Plan, which provides protection to these stable neighbourhoods, and zoning bylaws, which do not.

'After consultation with many homeowners, we feel that it is important to bring this issue again to your attention,' said Peter Smith, a resident of the Regency Acres neighbourhood, who has been one of the most vocal proponents for action. 'Several long-time residents feel both threatened and fearful as their way of life is being destroyed. Our older, established community has deep, caring roots and has fostered generations of families. We look after one another and enjoy the interaction with neighbours and the community as a whole. Stable neighbourhoods are part of Aurora's heritage and charm and must be protected.

'The transition to larger houses in their immediate areas force residents to make the ultimate and often painful decisions 'to sell and move away from the place they have come to appreciate and love, or to stay and suffer the indignity of these new monstrosities which will, and do, severely impact their lives and the enjoyment of their properties. Residents have the undeniable rights to privacy, sunlight and proper airflow, and supersized houses rob us of those rights. And for what? Profits for developers!'

Illustrating his point with photos of new builds within his neighbourhood, he argued that the influx of large homes would make owning older properties 'out of reach for most middle income families.'

Why are we not being protected in our stable neighbourhoods?' he continued. 'This Council and Planning Department have lacked direction and political will to do so. To think that our elected representatives do not seem to care is both disgusting and shameful.

We elected you to listen, represent and take care of us. Indeed, the Mayor was quoted as saying 'that the whole issue of Stable Neighbourhoods is 'much ado about nothing.' Those of us who live in these affected areas strongly disagree and feel that Council's failure to find a legitimate solution is a cop out.'

Mr. Smith's comments were received by Council members, but sparked pushback from Councillor Jeff Thom, who said Mr. Smith's characterisation of some of the players in this debate, including Council, as 'shameful' and 'disgusting' went too far.

'From my perspective, I think there is a lot of well-meaning people on both sides of this debate,' said Councillor Thom. 'I find it discouraging when people come to a public forum like this and throw around words like 'shameful' and 'disgusting.' I think there are a lot of people in the neighbourhood who are family-oriented people who mean well, who want to raise their families in these neighbourhoods, who are building some of these homes. To cast them as undesirable 'who are bent on profits and nothing else, I think misses the mark and it is unfair not only to these people who are moving into these neighbourhoods who just have a general disagreement with yourself and also members of this Council who are also doing what we think is best for the Town.'

Councillor Thom also took aim at the argument that new builds would limit purchasing opportunities for many middle-income families.

?I keep hearing the term from a lot of the people coming to the podium that the neighbourhood is 'affordable' and you mentioned that affordable is around \$800,000,? Councillor Thom continued. ?That doesn't really fit with what the Region would call an affordable house, number one, but I think any reasonable definition, \$800,000 is more affordable than \$2.5 million, but I would disagree with saying \$800,000 is affordable for a middle income family.

?Truthfully, I think it is a bit of a distraction to focus on property values and the level of our values to keep them low and keeping them affordable as a reason to looking at Monster Homes. I just don't think they are affordable now, so it doesn't make any sense to me to look at that as a driving factor on whether or not we look at changing the zoning to stop these massive homes coming in. I think there are a lot of good reasons to look at the zoning, I just don't think affordability is one of them.?