

Council rejects 'insulting' Highland offer

By Brock Weir

Aurora Council last week rejected an offer from Highland Gate Developments Inc. to sell the defunct golf course to the Town for \$98.1 million and, in the end, stop a looming appeal at the Ontario Municipal Board in its tracks.

After a closed session meeting last Tuesday night, Council voted to turn down the offer and the high price tag on a vote of 5 to 3 and moved to retain external legal counsel to prepare for a fight at the Board (OMB).

The Developers propose a 180+ unit housing development on the lands formerly occupied by the Highland Gate Golf Club, which closed last year, as well as a 10-storey condominium complex close to Yonge Street. The plan has drawn considerable controversy from the neighbours surrounding the land in question, with concerns ranging from the development of green space to roads that could surround some properties from three sides.

Branding the offer 'insulting' to Council and the 'community as a whole', Councillor Tom Mrakas had the strongest words in favour of an outright rejection, while the other four voting for the rejection said the price tag was 'unacceptable.' Councillors, however, were nevertheless hopeful that dialogue could continue between Highland Gate Developments (a partnership between Geranium Developments and property owner ClubLink), the Town of Aurora, and the Highland Gate Ratepayers Association.

'The offer that was put on the table is not acceptable to me and not acceptable to the residents, but I do hope with all sincerity Highland Gate Developments and the Ratepayers continue their dialogue,' said Councillor Jeff Thom. 'Our responsibility is to do what we can for our Town, for our residents. The offer that was on the table was, in my opinion, not in the best interests of the Town but it doesn't mean there can't be continued dialogue moving forward and I would hope both Highland Gate Developments Inc., the Ratepayers and the Town can operate in good faith moving forward on this matter.'

A similar perspective was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson, who said he remains 'concerned with the actions of the developers' recently regarding their plan to deal with what they saw as encroachments from neighbours surrounding the golf course lands ahead of an OMB hearing.

'The offer put before us is not, in my eyes, acceptable, so it is important that we reject it, even though there are some concerns about the ramifications of doing so,' said Councillor Thompson. 'I think it is the right thing for the community. It certainly lets them know we are mindful of the situation and we are prepared to act.'

'We all wish that dialogue to resolve this matter would continue amongst all parties. I think that is in the best interest of the community for sure, but I can't help but feel a little frustrated at where we are today. I go back to October 28 and the comments from all sides were about dialogue. I remember their planner talking about the Ratepayers Association, working on things, and having that conversation with Highland Green (Condominium). There certainly seemed to be a lot of dialogue and a lot of willingness from all parties to try and resolve the matter, yet here we are 45 days later and we have an OMB appeal hanging over us. I do feel a little frustrated with the process.'

For the three Council members voting against rejecting the offer outright, their reasons for doing were less about the price tag and more about ensuring all lines of communication were open for continued dialogue over the next few weeks, ahead of a January 22 deadline set by Highland Gate Developments Inc. to either accept or decline the offer.

'This is not to say I support buying it as such, but I believe that was giving us the opportunity to have the developer work with the ratepayers group and residents who live around the golf course with respect to specific encroachment issues. The developer had committed to holding off on them until after the termination date and I felt that gave us the opportunity [for] the Developer, the Ratepayers' Association and those residents to perhaps work out something that would be acceptable to them,' said Mayor Geoff Dawe. 'That is not to say I support the plan, but I supported the opportunity to have further discussions between those three groups.'

There is certainly more than one voice with respect to the Ratepayers' side.?

Councillor Paul Pirri also voted against the outright rejection. He also voted against lawyering up at this point.

?I don't know if it is any surprise to anyone that these discussions and battles can often be very expensive and municipalities, generally speaking, often find themselves to be holding the short straw. For me, I don't want to see us going down this road. I want to see us continue to work together. I know there has been an appeal made, but I think there are probably some grounds in the short term that we could still work towards finding as much of an amicable solution to this as possible.?

Added Councillor Harold Kim: ?It is unfortunate it has come to this. I thought we would have a mutually agreeable solution to this, especially considering some of the options and buffers that were offered by the developer seemed agreeable to some. I thought there would be some common ground. I was surprised the appeal went to the Board so quickly given there was continuous dialogue.

?We're not purchasing the land for \$98 million, but I don't think I can support this for the same reason that we need more dialogue. I think there is still a lot of dialogue and other things to happen before this next step of hiring external lawyers takes place. Eventually we may need it, but I don't think [we do] at this time.?

Calls to Cheryl Shindruk, Vice President of Geranium, had not been returned by press time but will be included in the December 24 edition of The Auroran.