

Councillors play the blame game on southeast trees

By Brock Weir

Aurora Councillors were left to play the blame game as they ultimately signed off on removing barriers for three controversial trees to come down in southeast Aurora.

The three trees in question, sitting behind a nearly complete new home on 33 Longthorpe Court, have dominated multiple hours of Council time this fall. There had been multiple delegations by the homeowners in question, neighbours opposing the trees coming down, and Councillors on both sides of the issue making impassioned pleas to either save the trees or let the homeowner go about his business.

The issue boils down to a grading plan. When a designated house on the property was moved, three mature trees behind it remained. There had been some debate on whether these properties retained a heritage designation in the absence of the house, but the property owner contended the trees had to go to accommodate a grading plan that had been approved by the Town.

The plan did not include the three trees and that's the bone of contention, with neighbouring residents filling the Council chambers pleading for their preservation and the value they brought to their homes.

Their pleas were initially successful, with Council tasking staff to work with the builders in coming up with a new grading plan to keep the trees. At the end of the day, however, this was deemed 'impossible.'

'Despite the fact we would like to keep the trees, it does not work,' said Councillor Paul Pirri. 'What's the responsible thing to do, emotions aside? For me, it would be to have this reconsideration.'

Added Councillor Evelyn Buck: 'After weeks, torrents, and oceans of talk, we have come to the obvious conclusion that was, strictly speaking, a staff matter to begin with. Why did we get into that? Because the neighbours came here and demanded that we do not allow those trees to be removed and they had champions at this table. That is the reason. They were allowed to believe they have that right, they were allowed to believe their appeal was righteous, and it never was.'

Councillor Buck was not the only Councillor ascribing just where the process went wrong but most of her fellow Councillors looked in a different direction to determine just where the buck ultimately stops.

'It is always concerning when we see the same issue over and over again and each time we get a little bit more information to come to a final conclusion,' said Councillor Michael Thompson, saying it would be 'good' to know where mistakes were made along the way. 'Residents are deeply affected by this. I didn't see a solution last time and I don't see a solution this time to avoid the removal of the trees.'

Councillor John Gallo added he had no interest in holding the resident 'hostage' because of the situation, but it was important to 'figure out' how things got to this point.

'It is extremely unfair that the entire neighbourhood is put in this position,' said Councillor Gallo. 'I am not sure who to point my finger at, and hopefully one day I will figure that out [because] unfortunately, these types of things are happening a little too frequently for my liking. Through no fault, in my view, of the residents and that particular homeowner, somebody made a mistake and I am quite interested in how that happened.'

Similar views were shared by Councillor Sandra Humfries, a strong supporter of keeping the trees in place who ultimately voted to keep the trees in place once again last week. She said that after six weeks of discussion, a recommendation saying the preservation was 'impossible' was unfortunate.

?We owe an apology to the neighbours, to Mr. Kotsopolous, everyone,? she said. ?We caused some problems out there that didn't have to happen. I would like a review done on how we got here and how it is going to be avoided in the future. It is not fair for our neighbours to be put in this position, it is not fair for Council to be put in this position. I don't see this as a one-person error. It is a process issue, end-to-end, that needs to be reviewed.?

Listening to the positions of others, Councillor Buck suggested Council should not be ?pointing fingers? at staff to justify ?what we did at this table? in causing delays and obstacles to the ultimate conclusion.

?Discretion is the better part of valour and I am not exercising any discretion in saying what I think the problem, the delay, the obstacles, the whole mess the entire community is watching ? they just can't believe how stupid it is that we're doing this [and] what we put [the homeowner] through.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner joined Councillor Humfryes in voting to preserve the trees and, speaking to the issue, pointed her finger not at staff, but at the property developer for not including the three trees in their grading plan in the first place.

?There is no fault here with the Town of Aurora, and I don't think there is any fault with Council,? she said. ?We have tried our best in an impossible situation to try and make this right for both parties. It is just amazing that this has even come to Council in the first place.?