

Highland Gate redevelopment "jigsaw" should be split: Councillors



By Brock Weir

The proposed redevelopment of the former Highland Gate Golf Course to a residential infill development is a complex "jigsaw" which should be split into smaller parcels for both residents and lawmakers to fully digest, according to Council.

Several Councillors voiced their concerns on looking at the extensive plan on a piece by piece basis after hearing from over 15 area residents, as well as the proponents of the redevelopment plan, at a public planning meeting held to discuss the proposal last week.

The meeting, which was held at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, was attended by hundreds of affected residents living around and in the vicinity of the former golf course, as well as members of the community at large, who expressed concern that whatever comes of these plans could set a precedent Aurora-wide.

Comments from the public were received by Council as a whole and taken back by the developers, Geranium, to be responded to in writing, but what some say is needed is a breakdown of the various moving parts contained in the plan so the best solution can be arrived at.

"The public planning process is probably the most challenging process a member of Council will go through and it is very difficult to balance our legal responsibility with what our emotional responsibility perhaps is and that is what we try to do to the best of our ability," said Mayor Geoff Dawe. "I think we have all heard the fact there is concern within the community for the fit [within the existing neighbourhood], the height of the condo, whether or not [the condo] should have commercial at grade, and whether there should even be a condo. That is part of what we are struggling with as well in terms of making the way through that. We are still waiting for a number of reports in order to properly inform us so we can make an intelligent, informed decision.

"We need to work together as a community. We need to see how we can move forward and what can make the most sense. I don't think everyone will be happy, I just don't think that is possible, but we have an opportunity to look for, and see, how we can move forward on this."

Breaking the plan up into bite-sized pieces could go a long way in figuring out the right path forward, said some councillors, including John Abel, who was the first elected member to speak following the public forum. The property in question, he said, had already been infilled once, and that is important to consider moving forward.

"I would like to see this broken up into pieces, first with a west part, then an east part and the condo," he said. "It is very difficult to address all my concerns overall, just as it has been for residents. I will not approve any application until we have seen all the concerns addressed and, right now, they have not been addressed. There is a long way to go before anything can be approved but, the way I see it as-is, I cannot support it and will not."

Councillor Sandra Humfryes said as a former neighbour of the community, she appreciated the residents' concerns and noted there was still a lot of work to be done.

"At this point, I don't know how we can say this is okay," she said. "We can't. We don't have the information in front of us to make those calls and those decisions."

Many of the concerns voiced by residents were shared by Councillor Michael Thompson, who said this is the "largest and most complex plan" that has been before Council in years and it is somewhat like a "jigsaw puzzle" where some of the pieces don't fit.

"Tonight, one of the pieces that stands out for me is the condominium development," said Councillor Thompson. "I am not in agreement that it should be 10 storeys and I am not in agreement it should have a commercial component. I think that does impact the neighbourhood significantly. Yes, we have a provincial mandate to accommodate growth but, at the same time, we also have a responsibility to ensure your quality of life is not impacted."

Looking over the plan, Councillor Jeff Thom was specific about his concerns. He shared Councillor Thompson's view about the size and use of the proposed condo, as well as the parking it would entail. He also sounded off on grading issues, and single load roads which are proposed to be laid beyond the back yards of several existing homes in the area.

"I, like Councillor Abel, would like to see this application, if possible, split into a more manageable size for Council," he said. "It is a jigsaw puzzle and many of those pieces don't fit, so that is something I would like to see. It is a reasonable request by Council to see if it can be split so the concerns from both the residents and Council can be addressed in a more manageable way."

Looking over the plan, Councillor Harold Kim said he felt like Dallas' Bobby Ewing where he wished this was all just a dream and Highland Gate was still successful and golfers were still playing the course.

"At the same time, I do acknowledge the fact it is not our property," he said. "Someone does own it and they do have their rights as well. In as much as I try to be emotional and heartfelt about the property, I know we have to stick to the technicalities and look at all the reports. It is my hope there is some common ground here that both sides can agree upon."

Outlining his concerns, Councillor Tom Mrakas said what is before Council just does not follow the Town's official plan and it is not compatible with the existing community. Aurora spent a lot of time hammering out those guidelines and principles they expect from developers and this misses the mark.

"It is my hope the proponent goes back and takes a hard look at the development they are proposing and takes the comments and concerns they have heard from Council, from the residents, and they come up with a proposal at the October 28 meeting that fits within our official plans and our guidelines," he said.

Before this process got underway, Councillor Paul Pirri said he believed Aurora's best bet to try to stop development in this area was wait for the golf course property to come up for sale and then try to put in a bid "but that opportunity never came up with Club Link forming a development partnership with Geranium.

"Unfortunately, the property never came up for sale and the owners of the property do have the rights to develop their property to some extent," he said. "I don't want to give the residents here the belief they don't have that right, but I do agree we need to find something that fits within the fabric of our community."

In her summation on her thoughts from Wednesday's meeting, Councillor Wendy Gaertner was succinct in her remarks: "I believe politicians are elected to represent their voters, to protect their interests, to take care of their community," she said. "I have been listening to you and I believe I have heard you."