

Highland Gate residents and local governments can take lessons from Newmarket: former MPP

By Brock Weir

Lessons can be learned from Newmarket in ensuring the best interests of Aurora, according to former MPP Frank Klees, as Aurora residents await word on the future of Highland Gate Golf Course.

For over 80 years, Highland Gate Golf Club has been a stable presence in Aurora, but now neighbouring residents and politicians alike are waiting for ClubLink, the property's owners, to make the next move after they shut down operations last week.

ClubLink closed the golf course on November 10 with an eye to "pursuing alternative uses" for the land. Details from ClubLink beyond that have been scant, but according to the Town of Aurora, no applications or permit requests with respect to the property have been received.

According to Mayor Geoff Dawe, area residents wasted no time in making their views known at Town Hall. Although he says they weren't "specific" in what they were looking for from a municipal standpoint, they were clear they wanted protection for their green space.

From Mayor Dawe's perspective, however, there is only so much that can be done at this point until proposals for the property begin to take shape.

"The first thing that has to happen is we, as a Council, have got to understand what their plans are," says Mayor Dawe of ClubLink. "One can assume if they have chosen to close the course they are not going to sit on it as an empty piece of land. Presumably, they are going to be interested in selling it, but I have no indication one way or another and [until then] there is absolutely no issue to discuss.

"If, on the other hand, someone says they want to put hundreds upon hundreds of town homes in, obviously there is going to be huge discussion."

In the meantime, however, Mayor Dawe stresses that maintaining open communication lines between the Town and ClubLink and, in turn, the residents, is a top priority, as is working in close consultation. He added he did not see a municipally-owned golf course, as some have suggested as a possible solution to the issue, as a "particularly good use of Town funds."

This degree of uncertainty has left surrounding residents worried Aurora is in for "another Glenway", which saw the closure and sale of Newmarket's Glenway Golf and Country Club and, despite fervent protests from the neighbourhood that developed in conjunction with the golf course, and the Town of Newmarket itself, culminating in a hearing at the Ontario Municipal Board, the property turned over into a high-density townhouse development.

A leading voice in that fight was former Newmarket-Aurora MPP Frank Klees, who introduced the "Preserving Existing Communities Act" to halt the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) from being the ultimate king-maker in most cases when a municipality has a dispute with developers' plans. At the time, he argued it would confirm the "authority and role" of local Councils in local planning matters, ensure local lawmakers are tasked with maintaining the province's growth and intensification targets based on their official plans, and preserve the character of existing communities."

Despite this act dying when the Legislature was dissolved, the Highland Gate issue is quite literally in Mr. Klees' backyard. He says the closure of Highland Gate was inevitable because the business case for it to continue simply was not there.

"The second fact is we have provincial legislation that mandates infilling and, with lands such as golf course lands, removes that decision-making from the municipality," says Mr. Klees. "We saw the example at Glenway and I have been aware for some time the

circumstances at Highland Gate were evolving. My advice, quite frankly, to the Mayor when we had an opportunity to chat about this informally, and my advice to Council, is they take lessons from the Newmarket example and sit down with ClubLink and ensure that something is negotiated that will be to the benefit of the community.

?[It should not] raise unrealistic hopes on the part of residents that development will not take place because that is unrealistic and can be very costly and time consuming, with predictable results given the provincial legislation. My advice to the community is the community and Council work on developing a positive relationship with ClubLink and whoever ultimately will be the builder or developer to ensure the character of the community is retained, that whatever housing may result in that community to infill some of that space is consistent with the standards of the current community and, at the end of the day, the community is enhanced rather than undermined.?

Whatever the future holds, Mr. Klees says he will be watching to see that it is respectful of the existing community, something he says he believes possible if handled correctly.

Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard says he too is watching the 'unfolding story' and awaiting further details on a possible sale. The area of Aurora in question does not have a lot of green space and he says people in the area have appreciated this green space provided by the golf course.

'People who have been in touch with me are concerned about the future,' he said. 'I think we are all looking to the Town to provide us with some guidance in terms of what protections there are for the Oak Ridges Moraine area, the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Area, and getting as much information as possible. Residents are concerned that this is going to be another Glenway, but I don't believe it is. I believe the Town has the tools on hand to work constructively with whomever owns the property in the future.'

The Province, he said, has a responsibility in protecting the Oak Ridges Moraine Settlement Area, that the Town's Official Plan is met, as well as providing protection for waterways that flow through the land.

When asked, however, on the Province's role in growth, particularly with Ontario's Places to Grow Legislation, Mr. Ballard said Aurora's official plans and secondary plans, 'provide the Town with some good legislation to deal with a desire to increase the number of people in Town, if that were to come about.

'The Town has those tools as provided by the Province because two Councils ago we did that planning,' he said. 'The previous Council approved that planning, the so-called Promenade Study is really our Places to Grow plan that sets out where we want growth in the Town. That was approved by the Town, the Region and the Province. To deviate from that plan I think would require Council to agree and I don't expect them to go along with that to any large extent.

'As a resident of Aurora, I look to Council to provide us with the leadership necessary to have responsible ownership in that area.'