

Highland Gate residents want one voice as ratepayers



By Brock Weir

If nothing else, Aurora residents living around Highland Gate Golf Course want a united voice.

This was the conclusion of more than 300 neighbours filling Council chambers on Monday night when a tempestuous meeting convened with the intention of forming a ratepayers' group to advocate for Aurorans living around the golf course as its future remains uncertain.

The meeting was called in response to ClubLink's closure of Highland Gate with the intention of looking at 'alternative uses' for the property. Residents were galvanized largely by Dave Newton, who has been distributing hundreds of flyers throughout the surrounding neighbourhoods urging proactive action, fearing what could potentially become a 'Glenway' situation in Aurora years down the road.

Facilitated by former councillor Bill Hogg, and attended by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, all re-elected Councillors and Councillors-elect, as well as former MPP Frank Klees, the meeting's agenda called for the establishment of a registered ratepayers' group and the election of an executive to lead the formation of the group. For some in the crowd, however, this was a premature move.

Founding members of the Highlands Community Ratepayers Association, a group formed 25 years ago to fight the possibility of residential infill development on the course, were well represented in the audience. Although they said they have not been active as a group for more than 15 years, they were 'extremely successful and effective the first time around.'



Councillors-elect Jeff Thom, Tom Mrakas, and Councillor Sandra Humfys assist residents in registering before this week's meeting.

'I have absolutely no objection to any kind of a new ratepayer association forming,' said Joanne Bartholomew, one of the group's founding members. 'But it is very premature in any way, shape, or form to elect any kind of executive. I don't believe we have any idea at this point in time what the objective of this new ratepayer association is. I also don't think we have surveyed the entire neighbourhood to find out who the best talented [and] most qualified [and] experienced people are.'

'To take this group forward, whether we register tonight or not, I think what people need to understand is it is admirable that we're all here together, but there is great experience here that hasn't been tapped yet.'

Taking a second look at their dormant ratepayers group, she suggested, would be beneficial as they are a registered non-profit corporation with all that entails, and there is nothing to stop it from being reactivated.

While the audience in a show of hands gave the edge to delaying the establishment of a new ratepayers' group a week or two, for others the time to act was now.

"I responded [to the issue] in the same manner that probably everyone here did when they heard the course was going to be closed, and that was with a million questions and visions of Glenway running through my head," said Mr. Newton. "The idea was getting people together to organize and galvanize [and provide] a voice to talk to the community, to talk to ClubLink, and that seemed like a logical choice to what has transpired with our neighbours to the north."

ClubLink, he said, told him they would have a better idea of what they intended to do with the property by Christmastime and it was only logical, he added, to have a group such as this well established by then and, given that the old ratepayers' group had been dormant so long, a new one was the "logical choice."

"Whether or not we have the expertise here in this house tonight, in the community, or in the GTA, it becomes irrelevant because the folks who have been elected to form this [association] aren't necessarily the people who are going to be spearheading each independent and individual tactic. Whether we need engineers or environmentalists, or lawyers, these people could be added at any time. [We need] an organized voice to say to ClubLink, and any potential developing partner, that this is a passionate organization. We're not just going to be reactive, we're going to be proactive, and interested in seeing where this is going and we want to work with them in any capacity. That is what I was thinking by putting together this meeting."

As the meeting continued, it became a spirited debate amongst the crowd. After presentations from Mayor Dawe, and Councillor John Abel who outlined legislation governing the future of lands such as Highland Gate, and remarks by Mr. Klees, who called Mr. Newton's initiative "right on the money", the audience opted to move forward together.

"To any of the smaller groups, even though we know people in these groups and have gotten to know them, I see no problem in electing four people to at least move this process forward," ventured resident Linda Dawson. "This is a delay. If those other groups represented here tonight want to put a name forward, please do, but this is not a time to start pissing at each other's corner. Come together and elect four people to disseminate information. I think that is all it is."

In the end, they agreed they wanted one association to represent them, appointing Mr. Newton to be the administrator of the fledgling group while they do their research and let candidates stand for their executive, and Ms. Bartholomew stood to volunteer to assist him in this endeavour before they reconvene in two weeks.

A date for a second meeting had not been set at press time. For updates to the story, visit www.theauroran.com.