

Mavrinac residents speak out against potential parkland sale

By Brock Weir

Residents in the Mavrinac Boulevard neighbourhood actively and successfully lobbied Council to fight developers for a six acre parcel of land in their neighbourhood to keep it open space.

But, faced with a recommendation from consultants leading the creation of a new Parks and Recreation Master Plan calling for the sale of the land in question to finance the purchase of parkland in other areas of Aurora, the neighbours filled Council chambers last week to fire the opening salvo.

Represented at the podium by area resident Nahla Khouri, she said she and her fellow neighbours believed the consultants took the easy way out and provided Council with the easy answers.

[The have said] there is a skateboard park relatively close by; you already knew that, she said. There are homes nearby; you already knew that. You could sell the land for profit; you already knew that. We expected practical, creative options from these consultants, some fact-finding, some investigation, some research, interviews perhaps with the people affected. They did not do any of that.

Additionally, the consultants directly ignored the motion from this Council in September 2015; the operative part which was to investigate and find green space or recreational options for the Mavrinac land. That was four and a half months ago. To my knowledge, nothing has happened. From the residents' perspective, it seems as if the consultants started out with a conclusion, to sell the land for profit and use the lands elsewhere, and then they selectively presented information to support that conclusion.

The Draft Parks and Recreation Plan ignores the history and uniqueness of the land, she concluded, outlining its journey from a parcel originally earmarked for the use of the York Catholic District School Board, only to be at the centre of a legal dispute between the Town and the Developer, Minto Communities, when the Board released its right to the land and Aurora moved to secure its right of first refusal to buy the land, as set out in the original subdivision agreement.

This has been a long road for many residents, Ms. Khouri continued. The Mavrinac land stays unused, untouched, and closed off to residents, as it has for the better part of a decade. As you all now know, many residents paid premiums to back onto that land. Our Town has been slowly, methodically moving in a certain direction regarding this land starting with the enquiries every resident made when they moved in. What we view as a special piece of land that our Town fought for, what we view as a gem that should be treasured, this report treats as an afterthought or an avenue for money. The recommendation completely disregards our interests.

Ms. Khouri concluded her delegation to Council noting the majority of Council has communicated with neighbours that they would vote to ensure all six acres would be used for green space, recreational space, parkland, sports fields, or other open uses and there is no reason to change course at this time.

Indeed, when responding to Ms. Khouri's comments, some said their course remained steady.

I couldn't agree with you more in everything that you said, said Councillor Tom Mrakas to applause from the healthy crowd filling Council Chambers. I know we have had some talks of what could be creatively put together for the lands. I think, at the end of the day, [the report] doesn't change my mind. I think some form of green space is what we need for those lands and that is how I will be looking moving forward.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner echoed these comments.

I think this should be kept as parkland to service your community, she agreed.

While Mayor Geoff Dawe asked Ms. Khouri whether the neighbourhood would be receptive to the tennis bubble recently approved for construction behind the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex going onto the Mavrinac lands ? an option Ms. Khouri did not rule out, although she questioned whether this would fit the needs of the tennis community ? few Council members offered a contrary opinion, with the exception of Councillor Paul Pirri.

?There are some things you said tonight that I don't necessarily agree with,? he said. ?With that said, I truly appreciate you coming out and voicing your opinion and speaking for the community. I really appreciate it, even though I tend to disagree.?

In the end, Councillor Michael Thompson, who chaired last week's General Committee meeting said the efforts of the community were appreciated and would be taken into account when Council tackles the Draft Master Plan in detail this March.

?The uniting force for all of us is we want the land to be publically-owned, recreational land with open space for use for everyone, all of Aurora,? said Ms. Khouri. ?The specifics as to what goes there, none of us are experts. We don't know what will fit. We believed it was in the hands of experts. We believed that's what was put in motion starting in September of 2015 and when the Town bought the land last year.

?Just because people have differing views on what should go there?I don't want there to be any suggestion that our community is divided in any way, shape or form. Those are superficial differences. We are all united in that we don't want any more development there.?