

McKenzie Marsh residents call on Council to continue opposition to proposed development

Residents surrounding the McKenzie Marsh on St. John's Sideroad, and from across Aurora, are calling on Council members to continue their opposition for a proposed townhouse development on the west side of the popular wetland.

This past January, Council rejected a proposal to build 45 townhomes on the edge of the Marsh based on what the majority said was an ?inappropriate? use for the land in question.

Developers behind the plan, however, appealed Council's decision to the Ontario Land Tribunal, where it is currently under review.

Concerned residents descended on Council Chambers to call on Council to fight for the original rejection, even suggesting Mayor Tom Mrakas use his Strong Mayor powers to overturn an unfavourable decision from the Tribunal (OLT).

Council initially rejected the proposal on a vote of 5 ? 1, voting down a recommendation from staff to bring the proposal back to a future General Committee meeting (a session that has since been restructured as a Committee of the Whole) for further review.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland was absent from the January meeting, but the lone voice against rejecting the proposal wholesale was Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo. He said while he was not in favour of the plan as it stood, the intervening weeks between meetings would allow questions to be answered and put the Town in a stronger position at OLT.

Residents' concerns were represented at the podium on July 2 by Trish Lear, on behalf of local ratepayers.

?I would like to take the opportunity this evening to remind the Council that this is not just a Ward 1 Concern, this is an Aurora Community Concern,? said Lear, directing Council's attention to an ongoing petition that has since collected more than 2,500 signatures calling on lawmakers to uphold existing zoning on the property. ?This shows sentiment across Aurora that we must do everything we can to maintain our natural heritage and the environment.?

Lear cited comments made at Council on January 23 by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim that the McKenzie Marsh was ?part of our identity? and road salt and garbage leaching into the area, as well as the impacts of fill, would be too high a risk. Similarly, she also referenced comments made at the same meeting by Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson that Marsh is ?a valued community asset? and any risk was unacceptable.

Councillors, she added, could argue ?further information has come to light? that could result in a ?compromise,? but she cautioned that ?information submitted by the developers is often accepted at face value and is not scrutinized and fully validated. It is often void of fact.?

?By allowing any other development other than what the property is currently zoned for, a single dwelling home, places the Marsh at risk. I appeal to all of you to reconsider the entertainment of any alternative proposals. Stand up for the Town of Aurora and our community at OLT. Get external counsel and help your Aurora community fight for what I know you know is right.?

If there was ?any time? for the Mayor to use Strong Mayor powers, she concluded, ?I believe this would be the time.?

Councillors have been able to say little about the application since the January 23 meeting as matters before the OLT are discussed in confidential Closed Session meetings. At last week's Committee of the Whole meeting, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she opposed direction received in Closed Session because ?I didn't think it was the right way to proceed for the Marsh? and it was not good planning.

Councillor Gaertner noted that she too would support the use of Strong Mayor powers in this context, but Town Solicitor Patricia de

Sario cautioned that doing so would be beyond the parameters set out by the Province.

?I was the only one who voted against killing the application (in January) and one of the reasons was for this very reason, that I hoped I communicated, that I foresaw this happening,? said Councillor Gallo. ?At minimum, it should have gone to another Public Planning meeting so all of you (residents) will be very clear on what every one of us had to say about the application. That was denied and the course of action was such that we made decisions behind closed doors because that is the way the process is, because it was denied when it came here. It's unfortunate.

?It is disappointing. I can't speak much about all the details until they are fully disclosed, which probably won't be much longer, and as far as I'm concerned?I'm happy to meet with anyone to explain?why I voted the way I did.?

Mayor Mrakas, on the other hand, defended his vote at the January 23 Public Planning meeting as ?the right decision.?

?It was an unacceptable application in my mind,? he said. ?The process is the process at this point in time. We're at the Tribunal, but as I stated a couple of times, when we're able to, I am sure all of us will make sure that all of you (residents) are well aware of what each of our thoughts were and the decisions that we make as a Council in your best interests. We will make that known when the time comes and we're allowed to, legally.?

By Brock Weir