

Neighbours, advocates celebrate win as Council rejects McKenzie Marsh application



Residents in the southeast quadrant of Yonge and St. John's Sideroad, and environmental advocates from across Aurora, celebrated a win at Council last week as local lawmakers rejected a proposal to build 45 townhomes on the edge of McKenzie Marsh.

Council, on a vote of 5 ? 1, rejected the staff recommendations to bring the proposal back to a General Committee meeting for further review, instead opting to halt the process then and there citing a wide-range of concerns expressed by residents ? including both environmental and traffic issues.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, however, was the lone voice in favour of taking the proposal to the next level; while not in favour of the plan as it stood, he said the intervening weeks would allow lawmakers to get further questions answered and put the Town in a stronger position should they ultimately reject the proposal and the developer, in turn, appeals the matter to Ontario's Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT).

?I know it is not going to be popular in this room, but [it is] somewhat irresponsible of me to just say I want to deny this application and I'll explain why,? said Councillor Gallo before a packed house in Council Chambers where the vast majority of the delegates expressed their opposition to the plan wholesale.

?I believe that we're making an error if we don't move this to at least another Public Planning hearing to allow the developers to finish their reports in a fulsome way? You can ?boo' and that's okay? I am looking [out for] your best interests whether it appears to be or not. Not doing that gives, in my view, an open door to the developer?to go to LPAT and submit an application and, in my view, there is a strong possibility they will view it as, ?You didn't even read all of the reports. You didn't give the public and Council [the chance] to have a fulsome application before you and denied it outright,' quite frankly.?

But the majority of Council agreed that further information like this wasn't going to change their view because, as presented, it is ?inappropriate? for the area proposed.

?Planning decisions have far-reaching implications not just for existing residents but for future residents as well. Thus, it is imperative that the decisions we make at this table be based on good planning principles so as to ensure any development we approve serves to enhance our community through appropriate growth,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas, citing the Town's Official Plan (OP). ?Every community in this country is facing the same crisis: a need for more housing, but the impacts and solutions of the

housing crisis affect each community differently. It cannot be solved with a one-size fits all approach. Our Official Plan is our Made in Aurora solution to building more housing for current and future residents and we need to make sure that any proposed development aligns with the vision we have for our community as outlined in that Plan.

The proposal, he continued, does none of that and fell short on multiple fronts including density, traffic, grading and cut-and-fill that will need to take place on site before construction can begin, snow and salt mitigation issues, and emergency access.

Let's not forget that access to the site is entirely predicted on purposely constructing an extensive road in a floodplain. In my opinion, in no way can that be seen as good planning, he continued. Do we need more housing? Yes, but it needs to be done in a responsible, appropriate way one we carefully consider and plan for, one that utilizes the infrastructure already in place. Jamming as many [units] as possible onto any space doesn't achieve the sustainable growth our community needs and expects and it is clearly not the way to solve the housing problem.

At the end of the day, Mayor Mrakas said the most basic question is whether or not the plan benefits the community. He didn't see any benefits, he noted, and also cited the real world applications of the traffic plan.

The Region of York, for instance, would only allow the development to access St. John's Sideroad in a right-in right-out situation. Should residents in this area want to shop at the Superstore at St. John's and Bayview, the Mayor argued they would need to take an extensive loop around Aurora to get back to their homes.

As much as I like to see residents travelling throughout our Town, I don't think it is appropriate to have to travel that far to just get home because you cannot make a left into your home. To suggest that they make a u-turn into what is already a hectic area for traffic is unreasonable and obviously unsafe. This is another example of what cannot be considered good planning.

These views were shared by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who said she was so grateful so many members of the public came out to voice their views.

Among her concerns was the removal of nearly 100 trees from the site as they control flood waters, allow for carbon sequestration, and offer many benefits to the wildlife in the McKenzie Marsh Neighbourhood.

As the land in question falls in Ward 1, its Councillor, Ron Weese, said his job was to support the ward.

As far as I am concerned, this is an open application but I am telling you that in the face of environmental issues, the traffic, the congestion, the risk, the respect to the OP, and I do think we should be working towards that, I am not in favour of this application as it sits right now.

While Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim agreed with Councillor Gallo that critical information was missing from last week's meeting, including input from the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, it was inappropriate to intensify on the land in question.

The Marsh is part of our identity, he said.

Added Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson: The Marsh is a valued community asset and any risk to that is not acceptable, so I am opposed to the development.

Putting the application forward to another Public Planning or General Committee meeting, he added, would only be intended to address issues and find a common path, but he didn't foresee that happening.

I don't think there is a common ground between being able to address the concerns and the risks associated with that and this development proposal, he said, adding the Council of 2004 - 2006 got it right with rejecting a similar proposal. I think the zoning

is satisfactory as it currently?to allow for a single home and that's what I think is defensible and that's what I think is the right decision. I don't see a solution that is a win-win for everybody. The only solution here is to uphold the current zoning and preserve the asset we believe so much in.?

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland was not present at the meeting.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter