

Neighbours, Council square off over Mavrinac Blvd ?park?



(Councillors Michael Thompson and John Gallo, along with an area resident were among the nearly 60 attending last week's meeting. *Auroran* photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

Some residents want ?democracy? to take its course, while others want a quicker, firmer plan of attack, two things residents in northeast Aurora agree on is they want a voice at the table ? and they want a park.

Nearly 60 residents from the northeast quadrant of Bayview Avenue and Wellington Street came together to sound off on the fate of a six acre parcel of land in their neighbourhood currently under Council review.

As *The Auroran* reported last week, the land is currently being discussed by Councillors behind closed doors, angering some residents who want a clear picture of exactly what Council is discussing.

The information session was organized by Councillor John Gallo and attended by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, along with Councillors John Abel, Chris Ballard, Evelyn Buck, Wendy Gaertner and Michael Thompson. At the meeting, residents said they felt ?misled? by the neighbourhood's developers over the land once earmarked for a Catholic school or a park.

The York Catholic District School Board, however, decided the land was no longer needed. As per the community's subdivision agreement between the developer and the Town in 2007, Aurora now has the right of first refusal to buy the property.

?The owner agrees to provide the Town of Aurora within its agreement with the [School Board] a first right of refusal to purchase [the block] for municipal purposes upon the same terms and conditions including, but not limited to, the purchase price of the site as set out in its agreement with the York Catholic District School board,? reads the subdivision agreement.

Warren Mar, Solicitor for the Town, said this is the most recent executed agreement between the two parties currently on the land.

To many residents who attended Wednesday's meeting, proximity to a potential park or school weighed heavily on their decision where to purchase within the subdivision. Some said they were frustrated and wanted to know how they could get the ?premium? they paid to be close to a school or park if the Town ultimately passes on the property, leading to further development.

?I did my homework when I moved into the community,? said one resident on the site plan. ?I then went to the Catholic School Board and?at the time they had every intention of putting a school on it. I went back every two or three years after that asking that because obviously our family wanted to back onto open space, and not somebody else's back yard.?

Eventually, he said, he was told by the Board that plans had changed. With that in mind, he said he assumed it was a given the land in question would become a park because the school option was off the table.

Others said despite the ?premium? they paid, new homes on the site could drop their property values. Others highlighted \$2 million collected by the Town under the 2007 agreement for cash in lieu of parkland, money put in a fund to acquire and maintain parks and recreation space.

With a figure in hand, some questioned whether this money could be used by the residents to take the developer, or even the Town, to court to settle the matter. Told this was unlikely, discussions turned to the possibility of a class action suit. The remainder, however, said they wanted to wait to see how things played out at the Council table before going to the next level.

?The Town has a right of first refusal on the land,? said one resident stressing she believed a ?collaborative? process on the land was in order. ?I think it is fair to just let that process play itself out. [A lawsuit] is my instinct too, but we just have to let this play out. The right of first refusal allows them to move the democratic process first.?

The resident made her comments after residents turned the tables and asked Councillors in attendance what their views were on the future of the lands and bringing discussions out into the open. While Councillor Gallo made his own points clear at the start of the meeting, arguing in favour of bringing the information out in public, Councillor Abel was first to respond to the question.

Going back to a motion he made in September 2012, and approved the following month, ?to pursue any and all lands? that could become available for parkland should the school board shift gears, he said that was still the case.

?That is the direction and that is why we are here today,? he said.

Councillor Buck was next. Although she didn't state explicitly whether or not she was in favour of a park, citing concerns brought by residents in previous years against parks when similar proposals had come forward, she disagreed that real estate matters should be discussed in public.

?There is going to be lots of time and lots of opportunity for you to organize and become better informed than you are now and be able to respond to the points you need to respond to in a persuasive argument to this Council that we should do what you feel is in your neighbourhood's best interest,? she told residents.

For Councillor Thompson, the more information discussed in public the better, although there should be some caution.

?I think it is critical that you are aware of as much as we can share,? he said. ?At this point there are a few pieces that we don't know and we cannot share at this point in time, but I agree that as much as possible we need to understand what is going on.?

Councillor Ballard said many of his questions centred on the ?process? Council has taken to get to this point, particularly in light of the previously highlighted parkland shortage.

?We have to actively pursue every opportunity that is out there,? he said of making up the shortfall. ?Without knowing all the facts, I want Council to push as hard as it possibly can to make that land parkland. The 2B lands and your neighbourhood requires it. Your neighbourhood requires it and I think much of this should have been in public. I don't think we're in negotiations, I beg to differ with our solicitor and I would have been very happy for a report to have been tabled last week so that you all could have read it before you came here tonight to know a little bit more.?

Councillor Gaertner expressed a similar view, adding, although she wasn't on Council at the time, taking cash in lieu was the wrong move: ?I thought that was a mistake because?this was a pretty big area with a lot of children [and] it's lacking in parkland.?

Responding to a question posed earlier by a resident on what is the Town's ?pain threshold? for securing the land, Mayor Dawe

posed that question back to residents, noting he wanted to keep anything in regards to sale prices in closed session.

?If someone is willing to sell something to you for \$1 and you outright say I'm willing to spend \$5, guess where that price is going to go. It is going to go up,? he said. ?We have a duty to all Aurora to make sure we negotiate the best price for everything.

?The gentlemen asked us what our threshold for pain is. I would toss that back to you and say, what is your threshold of pain? If the price goes up, so do your taxes. I think that is a fair question, but it is a fair question back.?

For some residents, however, this was not simply a possible land transaction or a debate over the future of the neighbourhood or, what one man described as NIMBY-ism.

?It is about a vision for our family, a vision for our community,? he said. ?What is the vision we want and what is the legacy we want to leave for future generations? Do we need another development? Do we need another 50 ? 80 homes? Or do we need, as a community, green space for our children and our future children and grandchildren?

?When Council debates this issue, we want you to debate it hopefully in the vision we came to Aurora for. We came to Aurora because we have a vision of what we hope this Town could be and what we want this community to be.?

Representatives for Minto declined to comment on the matter.