

Nursing home approved despite environmental concerns

By Brock Weir

A four-storey 250 unit retirement home and long-term care facility has been approved for the south end of Aurora despite land concerns raised by Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Originally zoned for a school, the Oak Ridges Moraine land was re-designated last week following a lengthy discussion. Currently dubbed the 'Coutts' property, it is located at 14312 and 14338 Yonge Street.

'This is an extremely important environmental functioning area,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'It is so significant, in fact, that a separate growth management study was dedicated to the area. One of the things that came out of that study was it wanted to ensure that development would encourage the environmental significance of this area.'

At the time, the Ontario Municipal Board deemed this land was suitable for a school with a minimum of 40 per cent open area to ensure adequate water infiltration on the site, the Councillor contended, and this proposal missed the mark.

'Are we here, as a Council, to protect the community's interests?' she asked. 'Are we here to protect the environment? Or, are we here to protect the developer's interest? I am asking you to please not allow this zoning.'

For other members of Council, this wasn't the question at all. According to Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, the land's former designation allowed for minor institutional use and the proposal, as presented by the developer, fit the bill.

'I am certainly supportive of the recommendation that is in front of us,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'It was already planned to be a school but the school board has deemed it unnecessary. For me, the proposal to bring in a retirement home and long-term care facility, I think, is the best use for the community as a whole and I am supportive of it.'

A long-term care facility in Aurora is something Council members agreed was needed, but it was all about location and cost. When Council gave the tentative green light to the proposal at the previous week's General Committee meeting, it was cited by Councillor Paul Pirri as another option to meet demand for affordable housing.

'It is a benefit to the community because it is going to be serving as a retirement home and long-term care facility use and typically those uses are offered at a discount to seniors who need the services and are supplemented by various levels of government,' he reiterated at Council. 'When we talk about that affordability and letting seniors age in place, this is a good option for that, in my opinion. This is a use that is needed.'

Councillor Gaertner, on the other hand, said she disagreed.

'There has been talk about using this site for affordable housing and I would say that, to the developer, planner, there was never any talk about affordable housing for this area and it doesn't really make any sense because if a developer is looking at highest and best use, this is a beautiful piece of property, and [to get] the highest profit margin for this piece of land, I don't believe they would have affordable housing in mind,' she said