

Ontario councillors find common ground ahead of OMB summit



By Brock Weir

After Highland Gate developers took their case to the Ontario Municipal Board, many affected Aurora residents looked to Newmarket to get an idea of what might happen in their neighbourhood, should plans for a 180+ unit housing development be approved.

Newmarket unsuccessfully fought the matter at the Board (OMB) but were, at the time, just one voice calling for action.

Municipal Councillors from across Ontario, however, hope they will have strength in numbers when it comes to pushing for OMB reform and gathered in Aurora on Saturday to lay the groundwork for just that.

Councillors Michael Thompson and Tom Mrakas hosted local counterparts from Newmarket and Georgina, as well elected lawmakers from the Cities of Brantford, Cambridge, Kitchener, Markham and Welland at the Aurora Cultural Centre, to confer about pressing issues in their respective communities and how, collectively, they can advocate for change.

With an eye to expanding the meeting to a much wider group of politicians this spring, Saturday's preliminary session was a chance for politicians to identify common ground and key principles.

‘We have started to talk about the logistics, such as where and how we are going to structure this, but it is also about collaborating beforehand to ask: what is the purpose? What are we trying to achieve both with [the jurisdiction of the OMB] as well as golf course redevelopment?’ said Councillor Thompson. ‘The summit [will] be about being proactive and getting ready to work together, but we wanted to start off with a small group to frame it and put some structure around it?so the summit has a more meaningful impact.’

The two Councillors called on Aurora to host a wide-reaching summit on the matter through a notice of motion approved by Council last month.

Since then, Councillor Mrakas said he had been encouraged by the response.

‘There has been an eagerness and enthusiasm to get together and look at how we can move the summit forward and what principles will be embodied in the summit itself,’ he said. ‘One side tends to win over another. Maybe we can all get together and, at the end of the day, have that strength in numbers.’

This was a view shared by Councillor Christina Bisanz of Newmarket.

As a private citizen of the Newmarket neighbourhood that grew up around the former Glenway golf course, she said she saw a

community being 'completely uprooted' firsthand by the process that is currently in place.

'It [put the community] into a state of disruption for a number of years to come,' she said. 'Having gone through that process with the OMB and taking a position as a community, we were trying to defend our municipality's official plan and it just became very clear to me there needs to be some revision to the OMB process and the degree to which the OMB can make decisions and rulings that override the vision and direction municipalities have set through their official plans.'

'By bringing together representatives from municipalities that may potentially be facing the same situation we did in Newmarket where we lost a golf course, even in other issues they might be facing in their own municipalities with developers going to the OMB, perhaps collectively we should be able to bring enough input and influence as part of the review the Minister is going through, to have some influence at truly looking at some changes and a new direction for that body.'

Fighting a matter at the OMB is not a decision to be taken lightly as it is often a very costly process, she added. The Glenway community had to raise their own money to hire their own legal team, including a planner, not to mention the money the Town of Newmarket spent fighting the issue.

'To have to go through that every time there is a challenge to the Official Plan, there is something inequitable around that.'

Brantford's Richard Carpenter, however, came to the meeting from a slightly different perspective. The Councillor of 22 years has his eyes firmly on the horizon rather than on issues already examined by the OMB.

'Our municipality is looking at selling one of our municipal golf courses that we have had for 89 years and the whole idea of getting rid of greenspace in a community just to infill and put pavement in is against the environment and against the community,' he said. 'What we're looking at as a municipality, which I am dead against, is getting rid of two large greenspaces in the community and then building another one, which doesn't make any sense. It is taking away from the neighbourhood.'

The nine-hole course in question, he said, is hilly and has lent itself as a toboggan run for the surrounding homes.

'It is the only greenspace in the neighbourhood, it is their park, basically a 50 acre park that the golfers have been subsidizing. When you look at it the other way around, it is probably the largest greenspace and comparing it to any green space, no matter how large or small, it cost the taxpayers the least amount of money. It loses \$10,000 a year but every other green space costs more than that just to cut the grass and maintain it.'

While this particular plot of land hasn't even been sold yet and is, therefore, a long way to ever becoming an OMB issue, forging ahead with a summit calling for reform is in the best interest of the taxpayer.

'I think municipalities need to find a way to say that the development industry doesn't run our communities and right now it seems to do that,' he says of perceived inevitabilities once planning applications hit the OMB. 'If I fall asleep in the back of a car and I wake up in a city someplace, I want to know I am in Aurora or Oakville because their city designs differently and it looks differently.'