

People should come first: Highland residents



By Brock Weir

Oscar Jia wouldn't have been able to approach the podium just a few short years ago.

Having come to Canada from China before settling in Aurora with his family in 2011, he came from a country where people "did not have the chance to say no to a lot of things", particularly when standing in front of a panel of lawmakers. In Canada, however, it is a very different story, and when the opportunity to say "no" to Mayor and Council came up last Wednesday, he jumped at the opportunity.

His voice was just one of over 20 members of the public who came out to last week's public planning meeting to reiterate their opposition to plans to convert the former Highland Gate Golf Course into a housing development, but his story captured what was for many people in the crowd, the essence of what they were fighting for.

"The world is amazed by the rapid change and huge amount of construction in China [like in] Beijing and Shanghai," said Mr. Jia, an aerospace engineer. "If you are a resident in one of those cities and you have to move away from where you have lived for years, where you have to wear masks when you go out because of the pollution from developments, you will not enjoy those constructions."

Mr. Jia said he has attended all public meetings on the proposed Highland Gate redevelopment so far and this time was joined by his wife, parents, and children. He recently bought a house in the Golf Links Drive neighbourhood with the seller being less than forthcoming about the future of the golf course lands, he contended. By the time redevelopment plans were revealed, however, he said he and his family had already "fallen in love with this nice, quiet neighbourhood."

"I have to say for companies, consultants, and even Councillors and Mayors, this whole development [might seem like] just a project out of thousands of projects of your career," said Mr. Jia. "After years, there will only be a pile of paper sitting on a shelf collecting dust. For people living on this land, it is about our life."

"As a ratepayer in Canada now, I am proud to be able to stand up and speak for myself and my family. I would suggest the Mayor and Councillors, and also owners of the land, to consider this development as a project for human beings, not just paper on their drawing boards, and also show us real democracy, that you do care about citizens' quality of life and wellbeing."

If the prolonged standing ovation Mr. Jia's comments received was any indication, he summed up the feelings of a great number of people in the room who said the lives of those surrounding the land in question should be given due consideration and their concerns addressed.

Those approaching the podium last week reiterated many of their previously-vented concerns, many of which have not been

answered to their satisfaction one way or the other by either developers, consultants, or municipal staff, they argued. These concerns include compatibility with the existing neighbourhood, the construction of single-loaded roads with limited on-street parking, and a proposed ten-storey condo development near the present Highland Green complex which residents fear will loom over the neighbourhood in a way that just does not fit in with the neighbourhood.

For the residents, the lack of answers was causing more than a degree of frustration.

‘There are no meaningful modifications or adjustments that have been made to this plan since it was first put forward by Geranium despite three meetings, despite all of the letters and concerns that have been shared with them, because they think their plan is perfect? and it is an imperfect plan,’ said Colette Nemni, who shared her disbelief over the consultants’ contention that needs for on-street parking on the proposed new roads would be limited. ‘I couldn’t believe the response. Will no one have guests come and visit? Will no one have family gatherings? I guess they are hoping only sad and lonely people buy these houses and nobody comes.

‘[Developers] have come here meeting after meeting and have told you they are listening and responding to the residents. They are not. It makes one wonder if Geranium is simply biding its time before simply making an application to the OMB. If that is, in fact, where this planning process ends up, I urge you not to be intimidated by this. The protection of green space can be for the benefit of all Aurora. It is not just about the house that backs onto the golf course, it is about all of Aurora and having no benefit for the protection of this green space. Do not let this hurdle or this threat impede your ability to do what is right for the Town of Aurora.’

Ms. Nemni wasn’t the only resident calling for Geranium to come forward with ‘alternative concepts’ for developing the area. Indeed, many of those speaking last week said they did not oppose development in and of itself, nor did many oppose the rights of the property owner to do what they see fit with their land, but what is currently before Council falls wide of the mark, they said.

Some, such as Lorraine Coens, rejected Council’s wish from last month to divide up the redevelopment plans into smaller pieces to examine as a ‘classic case of divide and conquer.’

Dave Newton, President of the Highland Gate Ratepayers Association, cautioned Council it is the group’s belief residents need to deal with Geranium individually on personal encroachment agreements, but lawmakers should not take this as a sign that ‘individual property owners somehow agree with the proposal.’

Others, such as Tom Hashem, argued the Town needs to ‘pay attention to existing residents, not future residents, no matter how nice and wonderful people they might be,’ a view echoed by Adam Crawford, one of the younger people in the crowd, speaking on behalf of his generation who grew up around the golf course.

‘You are members of the community, you are residents, you hold positions of power, and you do have the power to support us and support the dreams of youth, youth to come and my generation,’ Mr. Crawford told Council. ‘I hope to one day inherit my parents’ house, but I want to see the community stay as a whole. I want to see you guys put your best foot forward for your community and for yourselves. I just want to see the best for our community and my future life here in Aurora.’