

Residents, developers to hammer out Highland Gate park plan

By Brock Weir

After a week's cooling off period, residents surrounding the former Highland Gate Golf Course will work with developers to come up with a park solution that is hoped will work for everyone.

The collaborative effort was announced last week following a particularly heated process which has seen groups of neighbours lock horns with other groups of neighbours – not to mention Highland Gate Developments Inc. (HGDI) and the Town of Aurora – on amenities best suited for a 21 acre piece of land slated for park development.

“I think it is fair to say the debate over specific elements of the park has led to a breakdown of the fellowship that normally characterises our community,” said Susan Walmer on behalf of the Highland Gate Ratepayers' Association (HGRA) last week.

A new ad-hoc committee between the Ratepayers and other nearby residents not affiliated with the Ratepayers' Group, along with representatives from HGDI will be the first step in restoring some of that dialogue and, indeed, fellowship.

At the heart of the contention are a set of amenities set to be installed in the park. These amenities are outlined in Minutes of Settlement executed between HGDI, HGRA, and the Town of Aurora. The subject of considerable debate in particular is the plan to illuminate the trail cutting across the park linking Bathurst and Yonge Streets, but neither the developers nor the Ratepayers' Association were willing to take those out of the agreement in case it opened the entire document up for renegotiation.

“Our respective missions are to represent the interests of our membership and to provide a forum for the expression of concerns and ideas within our community,” said Ms. Walmer, noting the ad-hoc group's mission will be to “design this community park in accordance with all the requirements of the Minutes of Settlement and the technical requirements and limitations of the Town of Aurora, while representing the needs and desires of all homeowners in the community.”

The group will be comprised of two members of HGRA and two members representing the remaining residents.

“Its mandate is to resolve to the general satisfaction of all, the final details of the park and this Committee will work towards that goal over the next two weeks,” she said. “We hope and trust the Director [of Parks and Recreation Al Downey] will be responsive to our plan, subject only to the technical requirements and limitations of the Town of Aurora. Our goal is to resolve the outstanding issues, particularly the lighting concern, with the assistance of Highland Gate development consultants and create a truly beautiful park that combines the natural surroundings of the area with the needs of the community and the Town.”

Ms. Walmer was joined at the podium by Joanne Bartholomew, who spoke out against the lighting and other park amenities at the previous week's Committee meeting. Speaking on behalf of what she described as “100-plus people” who came together to address the concerns of homeowners, she said she was happy with the latest developments.

“We are delighted to be working with the Highland Gate Ratepayers Association as we put our heads together to come up with an alternate plan for the lighting than the one that presently exists,” said Ms. Bartholomew. “Our focus will be to mitigate the effects of the lighting, while at the same time enhancing the absolute beauty and uniqueness of this special piece of parkland.

“I think I can speak for everyone in the Highlands community when I say we are all looking forward to the completion and beautifying of this park so that we can all get on with enjoying the trails, the natural green and open spaces, and the amenities that are prescribed by the Minutes of Settlement. I think if we work as a team we will achieve a successful conclusion.”

This was music to the ears of Council members who also found themselves previously locked in a battle over the trail lighting, coupled with a reluctance to open up the Minutes of Settlement again.

“I think you guys who live in the area know the area best,” said Councillor Paul Pirri. “We do have some constraints, but with that said there is some wiggle room to work around and find something that works for all the residents in the neighbourhood.”

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: “I am glad to see we have come to this point.”

“This is a very good example for Council and our community,” said Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

These views were shared by Councillor Sandra Humfries and Mayor Dawe, the latter of whom said, “We appreciate your willingness to work together.”