

Residents largely satisfied with Highland Gate settlement

By Brock Weir

Over the past year, Lorraine Coens had been one of the most vocal residents of the Highland Gate community opposing redevelopment plans.

That was a position she maintained until less than a month ago, speaking out against the minutes of settlement reached between the developers, the municipality and ratepayers. Speaking at last week's final Ontario Municipal Board hearing on the matter, however, things had significantly changed.

"I have been maybe the most vocal against the development's proposal right from the get-go," said Ms. Coens last week, noting she had reached a settlement with the developer over her Eldon Crescent property, which was slated to be bordered on three of four sides by roads. "Somewhere along the line, I guess after the third public planning meeting, I was beginning to come to the realization that, in my mind, I was still fighting the battle with the original development which happened 30 years ago and we were kind of thrown under the bus at that point.

"Our golf course, as it was, changed with all the new houses which exist right up the middle. I saw that the Town had finally come to an agreement with the developer and the ratepayers' and the most important thing to me was losing greenspace."

The agreement, however, showed "extensive parkland" would remain, a detail which she said gave her some satisfaction, particularly with trails remaining along her property line. With some buffering and landscaping, this detail will maintain the privacy she and her family were looking for and represented a big difference from what was originally proposed.

"When I met with the developer, finally, I couldn't have met with more gracious people," Ms. Coens concluded. "I want to thank them for that. They have addressed my privacy concerns after 45 years of living in a relatively quiet area. If everything comes to fruition the way I envision what they have told me, even if half of it comes through, it will be great."

Another member of the public speaking in favour of the amended proposal was Brookland's Bruce Corbett, who spoke on his own behalf, as well as on the behalf of the Oak Ridges Trail Association, of which he is the Aurora Chapter Chair.

When this process started in the spring of 2015, he spoke of the importance of a continuous off-road multipurpose trail running from Bathurst Street to Yonge Street, as this was the last opportunity to maintain such a continuous connection.

"In June 2015, these were our hopes, but in the ensuing months, our hopes seemed less and less likely to come true," said Mr. Corbett. "We had expected some leadership from the Town but this never seemed to get going. Fast forward to November of 2016. During late last month I was presented with a new revised Highland Gate masterplan and presto! Before me contained a plan containing all that we had hoped for, and more.

"Suddenly we saw a plan for that fully off-road trail spanning west Aurora from Bathurst to near Yonge Street. In addition, we saw integrated trails using all three of the existing underpasses. We saw an off-road trail added that more than doubled the original proposal. Every quadrant of the property now has more planned trails, in particular the portion from Murray Drive toward the east has been vastly improved. With this new plan, I am happy, the Oak Ridges Trail Association is very happy. Aurora residents both present and future are happy."

But it was a long road to get to this state of happiness, he said, questioning the twists and turns along the way.

"How has this happy ending suddenly emerged from what has been an unnecessarily protracted adversarial and divisive process over the past two years? At this point it is my impression that all parties owe a debt of gratitude to a small group of people who have agreed to come together to cooperatively share their expertise in order to create the best plan possible for all concerned."

These "few members" of the Highland Gate Ratepayers Association, as well as Geranium (who, along with Club Link, represent two halves of the whole that is Highland Gate Redevelopments Inc.) stepped up to the plate in ways which, said Mr. Corbett, were only realised recently.

"The news of their accomplishments came out only after the legal veil of secrecy was lifted," he said. "Only then was the extensive work and achievement of this small group revealed. Had it not been for the work of these few individuals and volunteers, this revised plan could never have been achieved. I applaud and earnestly thank these dedicated individuals and Geranium staff members on behalf of Aurora residents, present and future."

There was one resident speaking at last week's meeting, however, who was firmly holding her applause "Susan Shaw.

Ms. Shaw, who has also been a vocal participant throughout this entire journey, expressed her dissatisfaction with the process. While she said the mediated settlement "demonstrates the process can work when dedicated individuals are willing to undergo the negotiation process, albeit at a great cost of time and money," she said the fight with the OMB and Highland Gate has been

?adversarial, intimidating? and divisive within the community.

?It has also been costly,? said Ms. Shaw, who also advocated for increased greenspace within the plan. ?The expense of hiring lawyers, planners and other experts along with the fear of possible cost awards by the OMB, if the developers' appeals should be successful, has excluded many participants from these negotiations.

?Many members of the Highland Gate Ratepayers Association set aside an incredible amount of personal time in order to actively participate in these negotiations. Several dedicated members of the association spent countless hours researching policies, plans, technical documents, and participating in numerous meetings to prepare for these negotiations. Not every community or ratepayers' association is willing or can afford to enter into such negotiations. Although the Highland Gate Ratepayers had the interest and resources to persist, it is not a sustainable method for good planning in all communities within Ontario. Therefore, I would argue that this arduous, adversarial, and far too costly process of resolving planning issues does not meet the definition of proper planning principles.

?I am extremely disappointed in our town for failing to take a strong role in commenting on the original draft plan before the formal deadline, but again I understood it was through fear of comments being used in an adversarial format that might result in costs to the Town if it proceeded with an OMB hearing. The Town has still not explained to its citizens what concerns it had with both the February original draft plan and the current draft plan that is before you today. It appears to me and many other citizens that the Town preferred to let the residents cope with this planning process rather than perform an elected leadership role in presenting its views of the plan.?