

Residents push for input on school lands



(Students and York Regional Police walk to Rick Hansen Public School last week. Land formerly slated for a nearby Catholic School is currently under discussion by Council with adjacent neighbours pushing for parks rather than additional homes. Auroran photo by Jeff Doner)

By Brock Weir

Residents in Aurora's Bayview and Wellington area are making the push for a piece of neighbourhood land previously slated for a school.

Neighbours were alerted to a pending decision on the future of the property in Aurora's 2B development by a letter from Councillor John Gallo. The land in question was originally planned for a school, but the York Catholic District School Board changed direction.

With the board releasing the property, Aurora has first crack on what to do with it.

Neighbours and the community at large will have a further opportunity to sound off on the piece of property at an information session scheduled for this Wednesday evening, October 16, at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers.

In a letter dated October 7, 2013, and addressed to the residents of Borealis Avenue, Bilbrough Street, and Suffolk Avenue, Councillor Gallo provided the public recommendation up for discussion in a confidential closed session meeting the following evening, a topic which was also discussed in closed session on October 1.

'I realise that the information is not clear as to what 'recommendations' Aurora Council will adopt, as it is a closed session item. I am not at liberty to communicate what the recommendation from General Committee to Council is,' he wrote. 'However, I believe you should have an opportunity to express your views on what you would like to see on that site, or at a minimum, be informed as to the latest information regarding that site.'

He closed by inviting residents to provide their views either by email to him, or by showing up to last week's Council meeting to speak during Open Forum. It was an invitation taken up by Patty Huke, a resident of Suffolk Avenue.

'When I purchased the land, my husband and I were told this would be a school or parkland,' she told Councillors. 'Nobody said there was going to be houses, no one said there was going to be any building on it. What we would like to see happen is a park, tennis courts, maybe a community garden, something for our children to enjoy.'

'The area is surrounded by houses. What we need is somewhere for our children to go and play.'

Councillor Gallo told The Auroran he sent out the letter because he felt 'uncomfortable' with the decision that could be made by Council without community input. Since last week's meeting, he says he's received 85 emails from residents on what to do with the land. He also notes that \$2 million was received by the Town from the developer for cash in lieu of parkland and public input is 'essential.'

'They need to express their opinions,' he says. 'It doesn't mean we can accomplish everything that we want, and we might accomplish nothing that they want. It was important to me to engage them in the process and to make them well aware we're making a decision about their neighbourhood. They have a right to hear from each and every one of us why or why not we want to buy that property.'

Regardless of whether Council can do everything or nothing they want, everything could come with a price, says Mayor Geoffrey Dawe.

Although Mayor Dawe says he is reluctant to discuss anything that might be part of a closed session meeting, there are a number of things to consider.

'Everyone should have input with regards to what goes on in their neighbourhood,' he says. 'The difference here in Aurora is because Councillors are elected at large and we are not a ward [system], you have to look at it from the perspective of the entire town, as opposed to a specific area. As the system stands right now, we are obligated to look at this from the perspective of the entire community.'

'People are saying they want this as a park, but at what price? To use an extreme example, if it was \$50 million, would you still be interested in having a park? If it was \$50, the answer is yes, but if it was \$50 million, the answer is probably no. Our obligation is to look at the value and if this is money well spent in this particular area.'

Councillor Evelyn Buck also highlights the potential cost of creating a park with the land, including uncertainty over how much land would be available for a possible park once other factors like use and buffering between any park and surrounding houses are taken into consideration. She said she was also struggling with this issue being limited to closed session discussion.

'There is only one reason [it is being discussed behind closed doors and that is because there is a price on that lot,' she says. 'The first time I heard of this site was two weeks before it came up for us to deal with. I received an email from a neighbour asking me if I could do anything for the site?because neighbours have been using it as a dump for a long time for household and garden waste.'

'The last straw was an elderly woman walking across the street with a dead animal and tossed it over the fence. That's how the neighbours have been using the site they earnestly plead for to be used as a park site.'