

Shining Hill proposal loses apartment block, environmental concerns still at issue

A residential redevelopment proposed for the northwest corner of Yonge Street and St. John's Sideroad has been downsized following concerns from neighbours, but environmental issues are still leaving residents seeing red.

Last week, proponents of the Shining Hill Development presented a revised plan to Council.

Seated at the Public Planning meeting, Councillors received a new proposal for 87 detached homes, five townhouse blocks (21 units in total), a neighbourhood park block, a school block (St. Anne's School) and a natural heritage system.

Gone from the proposal is a previously pitched 200-unit multi-storey residential building, which has now been replaced with 21 townhouse units.

'The [changes] do come as a result of listening to the residents,' said planner Don Given on behalf of the proponent. 'We have removed 200 units from the plan and replaced that with townhouses, which are 21 townhouses and a couple of singles. The total change in this development is significant. We have reduced the yield by 180 units.'

Residents who came to speak remotely at the four-hour meeting, however, had other matter of significance in mind, with concerns including the impact of the development on at-risk wildlife, traffic on St. John's and the surrounding communities, and overall quality of life.

Environmental advocate Wendy Kenyon, for instance, said 10-metre buffers proposed by the applicant between the homes being built and green and naturalized areas do not go far enough.

'Natural heritage systems to the west and the east have been identified as extremely sensitive,' she said, underlining that nearby lands have been identified as potential endangered bat habitat. 'The Natural Heritage Evaluation (NHE) has also identified area-sensitive bird species in the valley. The stressor is months, most likely years of subdivision construction and human disturbance thereafter, including trails, dogs off-leash and dumping. As per policy guidance the development and site alteration shall not be permitted on adjacent lands (ie: 120 metres) unless it is demonstrated there will be no negative impact on the natural features or their ecological functions. I don't believe that has been proven here.'

Similarly, resident Maricella Saucedo focused on habitat damage with a lens on tree removal.

'We understand that approximately 588 trees are currently earmarked for preservation and that is probably an optimistic figure (given all the unknowns) but do we really think this deserves a pat on the back?' she asked. 'Why on earth are we setting the bar so low on these environmentally-sensitive lands, using as our baseline, 'no trees saved whatsoever' with anything above that a so-called achievement? That is not how it works in a climate emergency, so let's stop kidding ourselves. The critical measurement is what will be lost right now in this case, a minimum of 1,500 trees, likely more.'

Beyond wildlife and trees, resident George Skoulikas said there were myriad other unanswered questions, ranging from slope stability, water protection and lot configuration, to road connections and wetland offsetting.

'There are so many unanswered questions from the LSRCA (Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority), Aurora engineering and planning departments and the public, such that the LSRCA requested the application be deferred and York Region refers to the application as premature. I am concerned that none of these questionable comments (on tree size and tree types, wildlife and wildlife habitat, barn swallow nests, traffic study data and encroachment areas) have been properly challenged, except by the public, and by Councillor Gallo [and] Councillor Gaertner. It should not be up to the public to verify questionable comments made by the consultant and by Aurora's planning staff.'

The delegations from members of the public left Councillor John Gallo feeling quite rejuvenated after a feeling of what he described as 'spinning his wheels at the table.'

Among his concerns was what, in staff's eyes, triggers a 'complete application' as, in his view, there were too many unanswered questions at the table from residents, Councillors, and agencies like the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority on a number of issues, particularly how the community connects with the proposed subdivision that will abut Shining Hill on the Newmarket side of the town line for him to feel comfortable in moving the presentation forward.

'It doesn't make sense to me to say we're only dealing with Aurora,' he said, referring to a road that heads in the direction of Newmarket. 'Otherwise, we're going to have to wait and see what Newmarket does before we move forward with this application. How can we deal with just Aurora and that roadway goes right into Newmarket and they haven't made any decisions yet?'

Town Planner David Waters said Newmarket is yet to issue any planning approvals and it is a 'what-if' scenario.

'This will simply be a dead-end road and there will be a three-metre reserve,' added Mayor Mrakas. 'That wouldn't be lifted unless the Town of Aurora accepted any solutions or anything to lift that three-metre reserve from opening up.'

Another concern outlined at the meeting was the issue of carbon capture, with Councillor Rachel Gilliland stating she would like to see more information on the environmental impacts of the development before moving anything forward.

This was an issue also shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said she has 'never seen so many outstanding issues' in a report and it was 'inappropriate' for it to be brought to Council without the answers.

'How can we do our due diligence and make a responsible decision?' Councillor Gaertner asked. 'I would like this to go back to a Public Planning meeting, but I can see the will is not going to be there. When it comes back to a Public Planning meeting, it will not be accepted if these comments, questions and concerns are not answered. I think it was disrespectful to bring it to us in this state. The residents were amazing. I can only imagine how many hours they spent on this. The residents were also speaking to quality of life issues. We have a duty to protect our existing residents and those residents who are not here yet. I receive so many complaints from residents around noise, traffic, safety and this is just setting itself up to be a long, complicated and unpleasant process for the current residents and the ones coming in. It is up to us to protect them.'

At the end of the meeting, however, Mayor Mrakas noted a final decision was not being made that evening. Rather, Council was moving the process forward 'to make sure we continue to all work together as we come to a point where we can make a decision as a Council and that is where we will get to.'

'If we don't have all the information we need to make that proper decision for the community, then we won't make it and we'll say no. If we do have the information, we feel comfortable and feel it is in the best interests of our community we will move forward with that decision.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter