

Town enters fight to protect Henderson Forest?

By Brock Weir

The fight to protect the so-called Henderson Forest, a heavily wooded, privately-owned property on Henderson Drive, against the building of two large homes on portions of the land, got stronger last week.

On a 6-0 vote, with Councillor John Gallo not present for the meeting, Council came out of closed door talks last Tuesday night and set in motion retaining external legal counsel to fight against the build at Ontario's Local Planning Appeal Tribunal (LPAT).

Once retained, the Town's outside legal counsel will work to support a decision made by the Town's Committee of Adjustment this summer to block the building of the homes at 672 and 684 Henderson Drive, a decision which was largely made due to environmental concerns.

"We have decided to support the Committee of Adjustment's decision of the refusal of those two applications," said Mayor Tom Mrakas following the vote, which was greeted by cheers from ratepayers and other advocates gathered in Council chambers to learn the decision. "There will be an (LPAT) hearing date and we will get those dates out when they are made public or, when they finalize them, and then everyone will be notified at that time.

"At the end of the day, we have an adjudicator from LPAT that will basically be making the final decision on these two properties. We will be there fighting vigorously to support the refusal but, at the end of the day, it is in the hands of LPAT at this time."

While it can't be predicted at this point which way the hearing will go, ratepayers said Council's decision was a step in the right direction.

"So many people from all over Aurora and beyond have become engaged in this campaign," said Wendy Kenyon on behalf of the Henderson Forest Ratepayers' Association. "One only has to look at the rich environmental identity of these Moraine lands to understand why they need to be preserved. We're delighted that Council recognized this and has done the right thing. It was a good moment for the Town!"

"We're delighted with Council's decision but, unfortunately, the fight to protect these Moraine lands is far from over. Last week's vote was an excellent outcome but the final battle will be at LPAT. We're hoping that whoever hears the case will look beyond the 'smoke and mirrors' and recognize the unacceptable level of environmental damage that would ensue if either of these monster homes is built. This campaign goes far beyond the Henderson Drive area and reflects what communities are doing around the province and on an even wider scale. If we don't take a local stance

on protecting our woodlands and our at-risk wildlife, nothing will change.?

The Ratepayers added they are hoping ?all the work done by the community over the last two years will be put to good use? when the Town's external counsel makes their case.

?We have to win this so that these pristine woodlands and species-at-risk habitat are preserved for future generations to enjoy. It is the only environmentally reasonable option.?

The area in question was two lots, one of approximately five acres and the second just under three acres. The landowner has proposed two builds on the northwest and the southeast of the complete land envelope.

At the last Committee of Adjustment meeting, planner Ryan Guetter, representing the landowner's consultants, told members that the proposals had undergone a number of changes since they were first filed based on comments from both members of public and municipal staff.

Committee members, however, disagreed and voted down the application in a unanimous decision of 3 ? 0 (with one member absent from the proceedings)

?We have a duty to protect the land of this Town in which we live,? said Committee member Clarence Lui. ?That is why this Committee is composed of residents of this Town. I share the concerns expressed by my colleagues and members of the public over the impact on the ecological integrity, including the number of trees that could be removed, the actual number of which is not yet known, together with the negative impact on wildlife, the significance of which, in my mind, is unclear? but the negative impact will be permanent should the proposed development on the land [be] permitted to proceed.

?With respect to this particular application, the size of the proposed building envelope at 916 square metres and the area of disturbance is troubling in my view. The proposed variance is not minor in nature. Accordingly, I move to reject the application.?