

Town turned down Metrolinx deal, says MPP



By Brock Weir

Metrolinx and Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church found themselves under fire from area neighbours and Council members alike last week over a deal to temporarily turn the church lot into overflow GO parking that will net the congregation \$15,000 a month.

But municipal staff turned down a similar deal which would have kept the parking lot out of Aurora's Heritage Conservation District, according to Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard, a potential deal over which some Councillors say they were left in the dark.

Metrolinx, the Provincial agency operating GO Transit, first approached Town Hall with eight sites around Town they were interested in leasing to accommodate traffic that will be overflowing to accommodate upcoming construction projects at the GO Station.

Chief among them was an overture from Metrolinx to lease parking lot space at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC), says Mr. Ballard, who had a teleconference with the body on Friday morning.

The teleconference and subsequent meeting that afternoon with concerned neighbours, as well as Councillors John Abel, Wendy Gaertner, and Tom Mrakas came a week after adjacent residents came to Council to express frustration over the Our Lady of Grace (OLG) deal and the impacts it will have on their neighbourhood.

At the time, Council members and Town Staff alike said they were as surprised as the neighbours that OLG and Metrolinx had struck a deal which would see over 150 cars come in and out of the Heritage Conservation District each weekday.

'In talking with senior Metrolinx executives, and I don't want to be seen passing the buck, but the Town did, in fact, know Metrolinx was looking for help,' said Mr. Ballard. 'They sent the Town an email and the Town responded on March 15, 2016, that they couldn't help them and good luck finding some space.' Those emails exist and I am sure the Town representatives here today will want to talk to the Mayor and find out who received and sent those emails and who turned down potentially \$15,000 for 24 months.

'I don't want to name names because I don't want to publically embarrass anyone [but Metrolinx] made an overture and it was rebuffed. Maybe it was just an oversight on the Town's part.'

Metrolinx confirmed they first approached the Town about striking a deal at the AFLC.

'We had engaged the Town of Aurora to lease parking spots from the Aurora Family Leisure but we respect the Town's position that this lot was needed to service other needs in the community,' said Kim Johnson, Media Relations Specialist with Metrolinx. 'We have negotiated similar leases in the past, including an agreement with another church. Since hearing from the community we have engaged them in conversations to alleviate some of their concerns. This is a temporary lot which will be in service during construction [to expand GO service]. We have developed a robust signage plan in consultation with the Church to ensure customers

follow main streets to and from the temporary lot.

?In the first couple of days after the temporary lot opens for customers we will have Transit Safety and a GO Customer Care team on site to direct customers to the station.?

Construction, added Johnson, is expected to be completed in ?mid-2017? at which point the decommissioned spaces will be re-opened at the GO Station and the church lease will draw to a close.

At Friday's meeting, Mr. Ballard said he often finds himself ?frustrated? with Metrolinx' communication with the community, himself often being among ?the last? to learn about initiatives within the riding but, in this case, he said he couldn't fault them.

?If I hadn't heard about those emails, I would have been even more frustrated with Metrolinx, but from my perspective, I can say they tried,? he said. ?They can only knock on doors so many times and Metrolinx Realty is a pretty savvy organization that has been working across the Province with all sorts of communities with all sorts of concerns and it tends to be pretty sensitive with trying to anticipate what the problems might be.?

The three Councillors present for the meeting expressed surprise and a degree of frustration that Council was apparently not kept in the loop not only about the OLG deal, but a deal which could have seen hundreds of thousands of dollars flow into Town coffers for the duration Metrolinx would need the extra space.

Councillor Abel, for instance, ventured that using the Town's former works yard on Scanlon Court would be a better option for the Town and closer to the station for GO commuters.

He and the other Councillors vowed to meet with Town CAO Doug Nadorozny to find out who knew what and why the Aurora Family Leisure Complex deal was not on the table.

?We have had discussions and it came down to [feeling] we weren't consulted and, hearing this news, I can assure you from my point of view that I think we'll try to get to the bottom of that,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas. ?We'll figure out what happened and who knew, because I definitely think if someone passed on it and Council wasn't informed that is an issue for us at the end of the day. We would be more than willing to partner with Metrolinx and find a different, more suitable location.?

Added Councillor Gaertner: ?I am very disappointed to know Council was never in this loop.?