

Compromise reached on Highland Gate park design

By Brock Weir

It was intended to be crown jewel of Highland Gate Golf Course's redevelopment into a residential subdivision, but residential opposition to the proposed 21 acre park design tarnished the jewel before it was even set in stone.

But, the park concept is gleaming once again after compromises on its design were reached between area ratepayers, the Town of Aurora and Highland Gate Developments Inc.

The revised park design was presented at Town Hall last week on behalf of the developers by landscape architect Mark Schollen. Controversy surrounded the development of the Highland Gate park throughout this past spring and summer as area residents banded together to oppose various amenities recommended for the green space.

Among their primary concerns was a plan to illuminate trail paths throughout the park which, they contended, could compromise privacy and produce light pollution. Other amenities, such as playgrounds and fitness equipment, were also questioned as to their appropriateness for an otherwise "passive" park.

This wasn't, however, just everyday opposition. It was opposition to key points in the Minutes of Settlement reached between all parties which paved the way for the golf course's redevelopment, minutes which all parties were reluctant to open back up for further talks.

Nevertheless, the stakeholders agreed to come together to hammer out their differences and the results are set for final ratification this week.

Following the June 27 Council meeting, the working group consisting of Highland Gate Developments inc., (HGDI), Highland Gate Ratepayers Group (HGRPG), Ad-Hoc Park Committee (AHPC) and staff met on July 24, said Sarah Tienkamp, Aurora's Acting Manager of Parks, in her report to Council. At this initial meeting, HGRPG and AHPC had an opportunity to look at the initial set of draft plans with the guidance of the landscape consultant who helped answer questions and concerns. All parties had a chance to speak to their concerns, share ideas and come to a better understanding of the project. The meeting was highly productive and it was agreed that HGDI direct the landscape consultant to start the detailed design stage of the project.

By the mid-September, preliminary designs were presented to the working group, with final details taking shape on November 3. All issues have been resolved or incorporated in the design of the park, said Ms. Tienkamp. There were significant concerns with regards to the pathway lighting and its impact on surrounding properties. The Committee worked very hard together to incorporate as many features as possible to mitigate the effect on residents' private lands, including placing pathway lighting on timers to energize at dusk and turn off at 11 p.m. throughout the year.

Speaking at last week's General Committee meeting, Mr. Schollen told Councillors and a handful of interested residents in the audience it was clear that lighting was "really a key issue" and they tackled it with photometric analysis to determine "the extent of light stray" from the lighting proposed.

"We refined the light standard locations so they would be away from private property, we aligned the trails so that we provided a better trail experience, and also provided more privacy," he said. "We determined the configuration of the boardwalk and the method of illumination because the boardwalk is to be located in an area that is quite close to some rear yards. All of this work was done in the spirit of cooperation and it resulted in some key design modifications.

"We realigned the spine trail to minimize light impact [for] a better user experience. We positioned light standards to mitigate the potential for light stray into private property. We increased the amount of planting density around those luminaries so they would provide more visual screening. We moved the shelter structures which were more of a contentious item with respect to concern about illicit use. We integrated the lighting into the boardwalk railings so that it would be low and not obtrusive to the neighbouring landowners. We added directional signage to be consistent with the Town's signage and wayfinding program and we added a timer control with the lighting system so the lights could be turned off at 11 p.m. or thereabouts as opposed to running from dusk until dawn."

Considering the heated debate around the Council table just a few short months ago, local lawmakers hailed the compromise.

"It is just fantastic and I can see from the face of one of our residents (in the audience) who was quite concerned about this park that she seems happy, so congratulations!" said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "It can't be said enough that the residents and the designer have worked to put a wonderful park in this area. I think it is going to certainly maintain the value of the area and it is just a very happy result after a long process of uncertainty and disagreement. I am very pleased."

Added Councillor Abel: "I am really pleased to see the residents engage with a developer and come out with something that is

absolutely fabulous. I remember at the very beginning there was the comment that Geranium (HGDI) does good things for its community and I can see with this effort that that is exactly true. When we engage and work with our residents some great things happen.?