

?Henderson Forest? advocates prepare for a new fight

Advocates for the preservation of wooded land on Henderson Drive scored a victory earlier this year when Ontario's Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT) upheld Aurora's decision to block redevelopment on portions of the site.

But the Henderson Forest Ratepayers Association is not resting on their laurels.

Faced with a request from the property owners for a review of the decision, the Ratepayers (HFRPA) are appealing to Council for their support on the next leg of the fight.

Last week, George Skoulikas, President of the HFRPA, made a delegation to Council asking for lawmakers' support in upholding the decision made by Aurora's Committee of Adjustment.

The request for a review of LPAT's decision would ?take us right back to where we started? said Mr. Skoulikas.

?I would like to take this opportunity to remind Council why it is so critical for the Town to continue to defend the Committee of Adjustment's decision,? he said, citing expert findings on the unique biodiversity on the site, including habitat for endangered species. ?At the 2020 Forests Ontario conference, York Region's Manager of Natural Heritage and Forestry said that Green Infrastructure has gone from ?nice to have' to ?must have.' He said municipalities must recognize trees as a capital asset that appreciate in value over time. That's why planting new trees as suggested by the [property owner's] environmental firm will not compensate for removing mature trees that already provide multiple benefits, including flood mitigation and carbon storage.?

A report from the Town of Aurora on the economic value of ?natural capital assets,? he said, indicates that each time a hectare of natural land is lost, ?we are depreciating our asset base and losing the goods and services they once provided. We may only recognize the loss of important ecosystems once they are gone, a loss that is often irreversible.?

?This is an important warning, replicated by so many respected scientists around the globe, yet local environmental firms working for developers somehow have a different view,? said Mr. Skoulikas. ?The Committee of Adjustment and the Town's appointed counsel at LPAT both agreed these applications are not in the public interest. Furthermore, development is not an appropriate use for these mature woodlands. They serve their rightful purpose now as mature woodlands.

?Mayor Mrakas, you are a strong advocate for our Official Plan. The existing policies promote environmental responsibility, including the absolute protection of endangered species habitat. The wording is crystal clear and must be respected. At this critical time, we're simply asking Council to defend the Official Plan in all aspects of environmental protection, including the continued preservation of Aurora's few remaining areas of endangered species habitat. These lands are too important to be lost merely for the short-term gain of a few at such a huge environmental cost. It should not be our collective obligation to secure maximum return for the private investment. To lose this land after this long and costly battle will also set a dangerous precedent in future attempts to develop other natural areas.?

Mr. Skoulikas' appeal on behalf of the HFRPA did not fall on deaf ears.

Sitting at the Committee level on March 23, Council members reiterated their support for the group's efforts.

?The residents of our Town are thankful for the work you and the rest of the team have during this whole process,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?I have never been one to actually say I liked the decision from LPAT, but this decision I did like. Even though I feel we already made that decision at the Committee of Adjustment to uphold our OP (Official Plan), the process is what it is. Unfortunately, it ends with LPAT and it is a process that needs to be changed, in my opinion.

?The decision [should] be left to this table?not an unelected body such as LPAT, even though they did make the right decision this

time. We'll see how this unfolds through the process and the review. Hopefully it does get upheld.?

Other Council members praised the group's tenacity in advocating for the land.

?I would hazard a guess the results wouldn't have been the same if you weren't involved,? said Councillor John Gallo.

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries, ?You are steadfast and it is to be very much admired. They don't know who they are working with. You will never give up and I think you have made yourselves a very strong, powerful reputation that you, the residents, and us, Aurora, take this matter very seriously. The environment is to be protected. It is not a ?nice to have,' it is a ?has to have.' This Council won't let up either.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter