

# Lease deal to turn church lot into GO parking raises ire of Council, neighbours

**By Brock Weir**

Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church's decision to enter into a deal with Metrolinx to turn their parking lot over to GO commuters on weekdays should call their tax exempt status into question, argue some Councillors.

Council members responded to the outcry of nearby neighbours last week after they learned of plans between the body that operates GO Transit and Our Lady of Grace (OLG) that is set to generate \$15,000 a month for the parish, according to a member of the church's finance committee.

'We do not collect taxes from them as they are a place of worship, but now they are an enterprise,' said Councillor John Abel at last week's Council meeting. 'If they are going to get into commercial parking then they should be assessed a tax. It is a place of worship, but it can't be both. If they are now a parking lot and charging money, that is assessment.'

'At least investigate and bring that forward. As soon as they start getting a commercial lease in there, I think that takes away from that exemption and they should be paying property taxes on it.'

It was a sentiment Councillor Wendy Gaertner said was a valid one, before the matter was left with Town Staff to investigate further.

The sharp response came after residents living in the Town's Northeast Heritage Conservation District came forward during open forum to express their concerns on the impact the deal will have on the surrounding neighbourhood.

Dan Revington, a resident of Fleury Street, said he and many of his neighbours were 'surprised and dismayed' at the decision, particularly as the surrounding community was not consulted.

'A GO parking lot is not compatible with the character of a heritage district,' said Mr. Revington. 'It is going to increase traffic in the very heart of the Heritage District, which is also contrary to the plan. I think it is reasonable to expect there will be a substantial increase in traffic. Our Lady of Grace is quite an odd location for a GO Transit parking lot. It is not going to be convenient for the GO commuters it is intended to serve.'

Maple Street resident Christine Mora offered similar doubts. An adjacent neighbour to the existing parking lot, she said she wasn't aware of the plan until orange signs were erected at the beginning of the month.

'We went through a whole traffic calming procedure ten years ago in order to deter cars into our neighbourhood,' she said, adding she is also worried about security at night. 'We're a small street with 11 houses and now it is proposed to draw 150 cars into our neighbourhood each and every day and leaving that day. 300 extra cars coming down our 11-house street every single day.'

'They need lighting all night long because GO is allowing access to this parking lot 24 hours a day. We are a residential neighbourhood and we will be lit up like a Christmas tree from all the church lights that will be on all night.'

Responding to the public comments, Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny said Metrolinx is facing pressure from the upcoming construction of an underpass at the Aurora GO Station and the OLG deal is expected to be a temporary one 'but how temporary at this point is anyone's guess. Town Hall found out about the deal the same way as residents did, he added, noting there was no formal consultation with the Town either.

'Our assessment of what we know leads us to believe we don't have any jurisdictional control,' said Mr. Nadorozny. 'The Province is able to do what it wants in relation to zoning bylaws?so there is not much we can do. The only consultation we know of was a little consultation done by the church itself and its congregation.'

Council members, however, were left unsatisfied, calling for an evaluation on just what they can do to address the situation. Councillor Abel led the comments, criticising Metrolinx for a lack of consultation.

‘We are sitting here and this is marching right into our area,’ he said. ‘No one is in favour of it and we know nothing about it,’ he said. ‘I think before anything takes place, we should be properly informed and options should be discussed.’

Councillor Tom Mrakas offered a similar view, added last year's efforts to get Canada Post to the table over their installation of community mailboxes worked for Aurora.

‘We need to speak up now,’ he said, calling the situation ‘mind boggling.’ ‘For me, personally, I say we go and take down those signs until they start consulting with us. When they consult to us and we come to an agreement, and the agreement is parking is going to be there, we will put the signs back up. If we have the authority to take those signs down, we should do it. It is just incredible they think they can just come in and do what they want without consulting with the Town. I think it is embarrassing that Council finds out about this from a resident.

‘I appreciate it is two private enterprises making a business agreement, and I get that, and they can do that, but there are certain aspects we need to look at. The fact that it is in the Heritage District, I look at it as far as, what if residents decided to start renting out their driveways? Would they just be allowed to do it?’

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: ‘It speaks poorly of their ability to work with other municipalities and I would hope that we have been working diligently upon this since it first reared its ugly head and trying to do something to address the issues. There are a lot of angry residents who are asking what we have been doing.’