

Messing with Marsh is not a ?gamble? Aurora should take, say residents

Approving a 45-townhouse development on the southwestern edge of McKenzie Marsh, which lies on St. John's Sideroad just east of Yonge Street, would be a gamble for the Town of Aurora ? and not one on which lawmakers should roll the dice, residents argued last week.

Aurorans from across the community, not just those living near the Marsh, came forward at last week's Public Planning meeting to push back against the development and advocate on behalf of a local landmark so many have come to enjoy.

Among them was Duncan Rowe, who said Council would be taking a number of gambles if they allowed the project to proceed.

?It's a gamble for Town Staff that any change will be accepted without the neighbours just lying down without grief,? he said, citing, among others, the gambles of being able to control nature and human behaviour, that St. John's Sideroad has the capacity to move additional traffic, that the wetlands will be able to withstand 100-year storms, and that drivers won't infiltrate their long-established neighbourhood.

?There will be grief,? he continued. ?Integrity and common sense shall prevail. I am confident of it, but there is no tolerance for that gamble here. Be sure.?

If there was any doubt, it was bolstered by more than two-dozen residents who were united in opposition, citing everything from the impact the build would have on the environment, particularly the wildlife flourishing in the marsh, as well as the existing community and, perhaps most passionately, on drinking water.

?As someone who is passionate about wildlife and the natural environment, I find the area one of unsurpassed beauty and enjoyment in our Town,? said Cathy Duncan. ?As a resident who has been directly and negatively impacted on the loss of greenspace in our own neighbourhood as a direct result of the Highland Gate development, I am very concerned about threats to any remaining green space.?

Neighbour Brian Horton expressed that he has been watching the Marsh ?flourish? for the last quarter-century, giving much of the credit to the foresight of previous Councils ? municipal and regional ? when they reconstructed St. John's Sideroad in the late 1990s not just to further traffic capacity but protect the wetland.

?Attempting to squeeze 45 housing units into an irregular, three-acre property adjacent to this natural habitat runs counter to the Town's and the Region's excellent stewardship during the last two decades and the Council's 2003 vote against rezoning for a proposed 26-unit development.?

This rebuild was also referenced by Olga Partanen who said it ?took years to rebuild the natural beauty and serenity that once defined the habitat.?

?The McKenzie Marsh, once a thriving haven for diverse wildlife, has slowly recovered from past disruptions,? she said. ?Now, we face potentially repeating history and I implore you, Council, to consider the irreplaceable impact not only on our community but the soul of Aurora's little piece of natural wonder. And, most importantly, the impact of our wildlife.?

Also speaking out against the proposal was Wendy Kenyon, a member of the ?Turtle Tias? group which protects area turtles, their nests, and their habitats, particularly during the breeding season. Stepping up to the podium, she said she said ?I never thought I would see the day where I have to defend McKenzie Marsh.?

?It is hard to fathom that 45 or even 40 townhomes are planned so close to this Provincially significant wetland, a project involving cutting down trees, grading, disturbing floodplain, cut and fill, building retaining walls and adding more stormwater to an already

vulnerable wetland feature and delicate ecosystem," she said. "Regulation does exist to prevent this so I would like to stress upfront that any development or site alteration within 120 metres of this wetland has to demonstrate no negative impact to the feature or its functions."

Shining a light on environmental issues through a different lens was urban planner Jessica Kazami who asked Council to "envision a life with your family, including children and grandchildren" without access to "a crucial element like drinking water."

"Recognizing water as a finite resource, it is our collective responsibility to make decisions securing a better future for ourselves and our children," she said. "I along with a substantial portion of the community object" based on two significant environmental concerns: proximity to a wellhead and groundwater preservation; the proposed development is dangerously close to Aurora Well #5 located in the wellhead protection area less than 50 metres away from the site boundaries. This area is subject to the Regional Municipality of York's source water protection policies and the Clear Water Act.

"Wellhead protection areas require careful land use planning to preserve water supply, quality and quantity. Conservation Ontario emphasizes restrictions in these areas to prevent potential impacts on water quality and quantity as well. With a masters in urban planning and a thesis on groundwater contamination, I can attest that the planned development will severely affect groundwater reservoirs."

With the opposition from the public clear, resident Trish Lear asked Council to consider who the project will ultimately benefit.

"It doesn't benefit the community, as you will hear tonight," she said. "It does not benefit the Town nor does it align for the long-term plan of Aurora. It definitely doesn't benefit the environment. It does not benefit the precious wildlife we're trying to preserve nor the natural movement corridor which passes through the current proposed development property into 220 Yonge Street and beyond. The natural heritage component of the official policy states that natural connections between the natural features should be maintained and improved. This we are not doing with allowing this proposal to move forward.

"This proposal does not benefit the goal of the heritage and giving it its best chance at longevity. It does not even benefit the future residents of the proposed development who will have to maintain the many items needed to make this a possibility on a site that is not really suited for a build like this. It does not benefit our plan to add affordable homes to our community. The only people in my mind that this development benefits are the developers who will walk away from this once it is built, leaving the Town, the community and future residents the fallout of the developer's short-sighted gain."

Not all speakers, however, were opposed to the plan.

A handful of residents spoke in favour of the application, suggesting that it would improve housing stock and options in Aurora, and increase positive growth.

Realtor Saverio Cirone said that while he understood the concerns offered, and felt they were justified, he believed Council, Planning staff, and other authorities "will not allow something that is going to be a detriment" to the Marsh.

"When I saw the application [I felt] this would be a wonderful enclave of townhomes, not amongst thousands of other homes that [are building built] now in Aurora," he said, particularly referencing the large development already underway on the northwest quadrant of St. John's and Yonge.

These townhouses would be ideal for he and his wife as they downsize, he contended.

"This development is about welcoming new families and enhancing the fabric of our community with fresh threads," added Eric Situ. "These townhouse provide versatile living options which can attract diverse groups of people and they aren't just building; they are future homes where lasting memories and friendships are forged and that is extremely powerful. As someone who has seen Aurora grow, I am excited at the economic vitality these townhouses can bring. New families and professionals moving in means

more customers to our local shops and more opportunities for small businesses?. It is not just about economic growth but also about creating a thriving and supportive ecosystem for all our local entrepreneurs. Moreover, the construction phase of these townhouses also presents a significant opportunity for local employment. It is not just about the short-term jobs created during the building phase, but also about the skills and experience our local workforce will gain.

?Looking even further down the line, an expanded tax base leads to long-term benefits like improved public services and infrastructure?enhancing the quality of life for all Aurora residents. I also understand that change can bring concerns. Issues such as increased traffic and the strain on existing infrastructure are legitimate questions and I think this development is an opportunity to address and improve these aspects. I am confident that with thoughtful planning and open dialogue, these challenges can be addressed effectively. It's about finding a balance that respects our Town's heritage while embracing its potential to grow.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter