

Redevelopment will bring parks, 'naturalization' to water courses

By Brock Weir

If the redevelopment of Highland Gate Golf Course ultimately moves forward as presented, it will bring approximately 50 acres of trails and green space into the community fold.

This was the message delivered at last week's public open house, which attracted hundreds of residents not just from the Highland Gate community, but Aurorans from all corners of the Town.

According to Mark Schollen, landscape architect retained by the partners to redevelop the course, approximately half of the 100 acre site will be up for parks and recreation, including a central park area of about 20 acres.

'When we started to design the plan, we looked at all the recreational amenities around the area to get an idea of what was missing so that we could build those components into our plan,' he said. 'As part of that process, we also spoke to representatives of the Town of Aurora to get an idea of what they thought was missing as well. We have developed a plan that includes many amenities that won't be found elsewhere.'

While trails can be found across Aurora, the proposed redevelopment will help bridge a few gaps as far as off-road transportation is concerned. Approximately eight kilometres of trails 'over half of which will be off roads' is included in the planning envelope.

'It will realise the plan of including a connected trail system from Bathurst Street to Yonge Street that will link transit and provide a larger trail network for residents [town-wide] to get to Sheppard's Bush, shopping on Yonge Street, and the like,' said Mr. Schollen.

Outside of the realm of parks and recreation, the partnership has been working with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Area (LSRCA) to improve surrounding watercourses in the area. To achieve their infill goal of building nearly 150 homes on the existing golf course lands, a number of ponds will have to be filled up and this, said Mr. Schollen, was something welcomed by the LSRCA.

'That was done primarily as an aspiration of the LSRC as a means to improve fish habitat,' he said. 'Right now those ponds are contained by weirs and those weirs are barriers to fishing upstream and downstream.'

This view was bolstered by Mayor Geoff Dawe, chair of the LSRCA, who said there was a 'conservation goal to re-channelize that area' near Sunrise Assisted Living to address issues particularly surrounding a nearby pond, where excessive sedimentation has resulted in flooding of surrounding properties.

'They want to see those ponds removed and water courses naturalized and protected and allowed to run free flowing without having to go through a pond, and you have the problems associated with that,' said Cheryl Shindruk, Vice President of Geranium Corporation, underscoring the Mayor's point about sedimentation. '[These problems also include] the change of temperature. Water courses that feed those ponds will be protected. There will be buffers established on either side of the course so the habitat for small critters and fish habitat, more importantly, is maintained and protected.'

While some residents raised concerns about trails coming through the lands, particularly half of which will be on sidewalks, they also questioned the wisdom of filling in some of the ponds. While the residents conceded the ponds in question were not 'natural', many having been built by the course owners in the interwar years, they had become 'naturalised' in the intervening decades, providing habitat for ducks, birds, frogs, and other creatures.

Others didn't see the parkland dedication slated for the development as a generous gesture.

'It sounds very nice you have us 28 acres of parks, we appreciate that, but how much of this park is because you can't build a house,' said one woman, pointing to area wetlands. 'You want maximum profit for your organization and that is the truth.'

Not so, according to Ms. Shindruk.

?Some of the green space to be conveyed to the Town is not buildable, some of it is buildable,? she said. ?In order to satisfy our parkland dedication requirements by the Planning Act, we have to convey land that is otherwise buildable and we have exceeded that requirement.?