

Community voices opposition to Schomberg townhouse project

By Mark Pavilons

Hot on the heels of a vocal public meeting, word has come of a pending Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) appeal into a Schomberg townhouse development.

Residents packed the King council chambers recently to register their opposition to a proposal by King Ridge Developments to build 32 townhouses and remove a century home on Main Street in Schomberg.

According to Gaspare Ritacca, King's manager of planning and development, they received word that the proponent is appealing the zoning bylaw on the grounds of a non-decision by council within an allotted time period (120 days). While Ritacca said staff did their best to deal with this matter expeditiously, the set timeline is "aggressive."

Ritacca pointed out the zoning bylaw is predicated on the pending Official Plan amendment, so it's a bit of a catch-22.

While the appeal is in the offing, Ritacca said the applicant is exercising his options, but the intent is to move forward and cooperate with the Township on addressing the concerns with the application. Hopes are the parties will come to an agreement before the matter reaches the OMB.

During the council meeting, the message from the community was made loud and clear "keep a century home and lower the density." Applause broke out on several occasions when residents spelled out clearly the drawbacks, and potential compromises, to this plan, delivered at the public information meeting.

Councillors, staff and representatives of the developer heard the message, repeated many times during the marathon, three-hour discussion.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini said he's proud that people can come out, voice their concerns. "Here, you have a council that listens. It proves this (process) works," he said.

The consensus, from councillors and staff, is this proposal, as presented, does not fit in with the present community and there's still a lot of work to do to make it fit in.

In the end, council voted to receive the staff report. The developer's consultant will take the concerns to his client and continue to work with staff on the details of this proposal. Staff will continue to meet with the applicant to review and address all concerns.

While most oppose the density, few were against building on the unique, three-acre parcel tucked behind bungalows on Main and Cooper.

King Ridge is looking for an OP and zoning bylaw amendment to change the lands to medium density, to permit their townhouse project. The plan is to arrange the townhouses in blocks, ranging from three to six units, with one semi-detached home. Units will be two-storeys, with three to four bedrooms, measuring 1,633 to 1,950 square feet.

As it stands, the developer would like to remove the old home on the site, as well as more than 100 trees along the north property line.

It's an irregular shaped parcel with 35.65 metres of frontage on Main Street. The property contains a portion of the Schomberg Creek. The property is currently zoned low density residential in the Schomberg Community Plan, and includes an environmental constraint area.

King's policies do acknowledge infilling for Schomberg. However, staff identified concerns with access, traffic, parking, stormwater management.

Staff noted the height of the townhouses may cause some concern to adjacent homeowners.

Some of the contention lies in the home used by the Hollingshead and Coburn families. An expert hired by the applicant said there's no merit in designating the property under the Ontario Heritage Act, but there is merit in commemorating the site with a plaque. The property is on the Township's Heritage Register for its architectural and historic features.

Kevin Bechard, from Weston Consulting, appeared on behalf of the developer. He said they are in a "listening mode" and have noted the areas of concern in the staff report and by residents.

He pointed out this project will provide needed housing options in the community and these units would be suitable for new owners or those looking to downsize.

"There are members of the community looking for this type of housing," he said.

They did have the century home evaluated and Bechard said there are structural problems with the building.

Residents did not hesitate in expressing their opposition.

A Merchant Circle man said the plan consists of too many units and will fundamentally change the neighbourhood.

Another resident said we shouldn't set a precedent where a heritage home comes down in favour of houses.

Charles Cooper, a Main Street resident, said while he's not opposed to development in general, he said the unique home should not be demolished. He urged the developers to utilize the home in the design.

He pointed out the density figures provided were artificial, since one-third of the property is Environmental Constraint and should be removed from the calculations. The roof peaks of the proposed homes will loom large.

Regarding affordable housing, Cooper said this is a 'pipe dream' since these 3- and 4-bedroom units will be expensive.

He has set up a petition which has attracted well over 1,000 signatures, indicating residents are engaged in this issue.

A Rice Drive resident said parking will be a major issue, along with emergency access to the site and snow removal.

Greg Locke, of Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT), called this proposal 'awkward.' The CCKT supports mixed use and the idea of townhouses, but feels there are just too many for this site. Regarding the home, Locke said the consultants didn't specifically say why the house couldn't be salvaged. He admitted it needs work, but 'it's a gem.'

Resident Mary Asselstine noted this lot is the 'gateway' to historic Schomberg and has a lot of heritage value. The home is a local landmark.

Other residents echoed the sentiment, noting the building is a 'unique identifier' of Schomberg.

Councillor Bill Cober said the size and scope of the project is at the heart of the issue, and he hopes the Township can continue to work with King Ridge.

'This needs a site-specific approach,' he said. 'It needs to fit in.'

Councillor Debbie Schaefer challenged the developer to work with the heritage home, noting it adds to Schomberg's appeal to tourists and visitors, which generate income.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti did point out that if this home stays, its location would hinder access to the site. He said a lot of give and take is necessary to make things work. 'Creativity is needed,' he said.

He, too, said people have to get the notion of affordable housing in King out of their minds. Given the current economic realities, affordable housing is not feasible.