

Zoning change for townhouses causes rift among councillors

By Mark Pavilons

Two of King's councillors are adamant about protecting the natural wetland in Schomberg at all costs.

Despite their attempts to impress environmental concerns upon their colleagues, council voted to approve changes that will allow a very small-scale development at the Brownsville Junction Plaza. Plans are to build four townhomes on a parcel behind (east) the plaza, fronting onto Cooper Drive.

The applicant asked for Official Plan and zoning amendments to change the site's designation from Environmental Constraint Area to Medium Density Residential. Staff recommended approval, adding a long list of conditions.

The proximity of the parcel to the sensitive Dufferin Marsh, as well as the fact it's in the floodplain, drew fierce opposition from Councillors Debbie Schaefer and Avia Eek.

Schaefer said she was shocked when she read the staff report and recommendations. While she admitted many stringent conditions have to be met, she can't support anything proposed in the floodplain.

The council decision, she stressed, should reflect whether we think the Marsh is important or not. We need to treasure it not risk it further.

Eek said she opposes any development on the floodplain, something she sees as causing a liability issue in the future. Wetlands like the Marsh perform a necessary function and need to be maintained.

She pointed to recent weather events this year alone that have caused substantial flooding across York and the GTA.

There was some debate on comments made by the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, who relegates decision-making based on provincial mandate and municipal planning policies. Some councillors were surprised that LSRCA recommended the project be approved, subject to conditions relating to drainage, flood-proofing and pedestrian access. But Eek later pointed out LSRCA is a commenting agency, and doesn't have the jurisdiction to approve zoning applications of this nature.

The project involves a .3-acre parcel at the southeast corner of Dr. Kay Drive and Cooper Drive. The piece is currently vacant.

King staff noted should the project proceed to the site plan stage, it will require site servicing, enhanced planting and a buffer within the wetland, a sidewalk extension, grading and drainage, noise mitigation as well as meeting LSRCA concerns.

The owner's consultant reported back in 2000 that Cooper Drive provides a physical barrier between the site and the Marsh. The property drains into the nearby stormwater retention pond, which outlets to the Marsh. Township staff agree that this pond will provide adequate control, along with soak-away pits on each of the townhouse lots.

Staff did admit that there's always a concern about salt entering the pond and Marsh. They're asking the applicant to address this by looking at other salt storage options and best practices.

Councillor Bill Cober said he's satisfied with the staff-imposed conditions on the project. He pointed out that almost all of Schomberg is in a floodplain, but that hasn't stopped all development. The landowner, he said, has the right to explore his options. These conditions may in fact be cost-prohibitive for the property owner to proceed. Cober also stressed that councillors have to have confidence in staff to cover all the bases.

Schaefer countered that they shouldn't rationalize development based on past decisions. We're living in a different, more environmentally conscious world today, she said.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti said demand for housing is high, not only in King but across the GTA. People will buy these homes, he pointed out.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini's support was based on the bottom line, and fear of a costly Ontario Municipal Board hearing. He believes an OMB hearing is a no-win situation and I'm not going to throw tax dollars on this one. He did say if there was an opportunity to win for the environment, he's for it.

This debate is not about who's for or against the environment or sustainability of the Marsh, he said.

Resident Mary Asselstine, who's a member of the Dufferin Marsh Nature Connection, said this is a bad idea and it won't be an ideal place to live.

The Marsh, she said, has been shrinking over the years, due to increased development in the area. They've been monitoring the Marsh since 2004 and studies over the years pointed to decreased frog populations, a change in both vegetation and water quality. They've even shown salt levels rise to levels that are now harmful to life.

She added development, even one on this scale, spells the death of the Marsh by ?a thousand tiny cuts.?