

Could be election issue brought up at coming debates

Concerned residents say transit hub will be 'wasteland'

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Residents of Concord West say they feel hopeful after learning the city of Vaughan will put together a study team to help them in their fight to save their shrinking green space.

Ratepayers, seniors and environmentalists staged a protest Tuesday outside city hall then appealed to councillors to preserve the only natural walking space left in their tiny community.

They say a proposed commuter station, planned as part of the major intermodal transit hub for the GO Barrie line, will leave their neighbourhood — the oldest in Vaughan — marooned in an industrial wasteland.

After marching with placards, they spoke to the committee of the whole about their concerns for the green space and the wildlife that depends on it.

SPOTTING ENDANGERED SPECIES

For years residents used the trails that linked their community to the Bartley Smith Greenway, a 15-kilometre trail that follows the West Don River, spotting wildlife such as deer and foxes even endangered species such as Blanding's turtle.

"It's not just our green space," said group spokesperson Dr. Paolo Correa. "It's a breathing lung."

But now the province wants to turn the land on the south side of Hwy. 7 into a commuter station with a 5,000-space parking lot and a kiss and ride, promising to provide residents safe and direct access across the railway tracks to the conservation lands on the other side.

The residents say this will box them in and they want the province to locate the commuter rail station to the north side of Hwy. 7, instead. They say they have the backing of the city of Vaughan, York Region, Toronto's conservation authority and environmental and naturalist groups.

They organized the last-minute protest to coincide with Vaughan's committee of the whole meeting which was defining the terms of reference with respect to the Concord GO station hub.

NOT ENOUGH NOTICE?

Many were upset that they'd not been given enough notice in advance of the meeting. "Nobody thought to inform us," said Josephine Mastrociccia, president of the Concord Seniors Club. "It was just by fluke that we learned about it.

"This is a major problem and it's being shoved down our throats."

But Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua told the committee meeting the city of Vaughan supports the Concord West residents, adding the

"group has been extremely clear. Perhaps one of the clearest that I've ever heard.

"I think from an integrity point of view we need to accommodate and find a resolution to this issue in a very effective and efficient manner."

While the decision ultimately lies with the Ministry of Transportation, planning commissioner John MacKenzie said the city will put together a study team to create a better plan for the area, one the city hopes will guide development.

"We think we can come up with higher quality, more detailed examination and vision," he said. "We need a more comprehensive, factual understanding of the features and functions and how to create a complete community in the area."

The city will use independent consultants to work with residents, landowners and other stakeholders and invite the participation of the transportation ministry and Metrolinx/GO. The study will look at the land and about 400 to 500 metres surrounding the area.

A similar study will look at the area around Vaughan Mills mall, he said.

He expects the study to take 12 to 16 months.

Environmental considerations will be an important aspect, he said.

"I heard loud and clear from the residents that natural heritage is a huge concern."

With its connections to natural areas in Toronto through G. Ross Lord Park, the Barley Smith Greenway is an incredible amenity unfamiliar to many in Vaughan, he said, adding it is a problem there is no direct connection for residents in Concord West.

The study will also look at how to connect the north and south sides of Hwy. 7 to make the community function better, he said.

"Roads create some barriers, no question about it,

"It comes down to how do we create a better place to live and higher quality urban design."

The residents planned to raise the issue with provincial election candidates at an all-candidates meeting last night.

To learn more about the Concord West group's struggle, see <http://www.yorkregion.com/news/article/1004232--residents-fight-to-save-greenspace>

For info, visit saveconcordwest.wordpress.com

Pictured top right:

Protesters with placards outside Vaughan City Hall Tuesday morning, trying to preserve greenspace slated for the new Go/Metrolinx hub.