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Neighbourhood's lobbying drives Markham's \$188M Shouldice land purchase

Residents demand decision-making power returns to community on future development in Thornhill

By **Irene Wong** Markham Economist & Sun

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When City of Markham announced the \$188-million purchase of the nine-hectare site at 7750 Bayview Ave., also known as the Shouldice Property, in September, the five members in the Pomona Valley Steering Committee (PVSC) felt a mix of surprise, relief and happiness after a prolonged battle with the ambitious developers gazing on the beautiful neighbourhood.

“There is a feeling of happiness and gratitude that the property will now serve the long-term needs of residents. The additional green space is very much needed, particularly with the planned large population increase for Thornhill,” said Vaughn Hibbits, co-chair of PVSC.

However, the battle has not yet ended.

PVSC is part of the community action induced by Liberty Development's application to build five towers on the Shouldice property.

At the beginning of 2021, Aileen-Willowbrook Ratepayers Association (AWRA) decided to start a community action when they learned of Liberty Development's development proposal.

“The heights and density of the proposed five condo tower complex shocked local residents,” said Alena Gotz, president of AWRA. The proposal did not fit with the historic Thornhill community, Gotz added, nor is there a high order public transit system to justify the degree of density proposed.

The action extended across Bayview Avenue to partner with Ward One (South) Thornhill Residents Inc. (WOSTRI) on the west side. They also reached out to residents of Pomona Valley and its adjacent area. Later on, representatives from the three Landmark of Thornhill condominium boards also joined the effort.

“AWRA claimed the Shouldice application showed “lack of respect for good urban planning. They were annoyed because the application did not respect the existing secondary plan, the surrounding “sense of space,” or the existing “build form.”. Another big concern was the vulnerable, natural environment of the Pomona Creek ecological corridor, the protection of which is one of WOSTRI's main concerns.

Shortly after Liberty’s application another application was submitted by Hazelview Corp. to redevelop Thornhill Square on the northeast side of John and Bayview, asking for four box-shaped towers to house 600 apartments and a shopping mall. All this was coming to the community in addition to two condo towers by Tridel the city approved in 2017.

AWRA called for broader community engagement and chose the Nextdoor social network as primary conduit to reach out and mobilize Thornhill residents. On June 15, 2021, 300 deputations, including 46 speakers and over 1,700 signatures on a petition were submitted to Markham's development services committee. PVSC also did a 40-minute presentation about residents’ legitimate concerns to the proposed Liberty development. The meeting went past midnight.

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In August 2021, Ward 1 councillor Keith Irish came up with the idea to have the city purchase the former Shouldice Hospital property in its entirety from Liberty

Development. The idea was well received in the community and supported by Mayor Frank Scarpitti.

To give a push, AWRA and WOSTRI hosted tours for each member of Markham council as well as Thornhill members of provincial parliament, walking with them through the area, introducing them to the issues.

The action groups said they were pursuing a strategy of relentless advocacy at elected officials to battle against aggressive developers.

“We are now living in difficult times when good urban design principles are superseded by other interests. Residents and municipalities alike are learning how to navigate that change and how to return the power over how our communities are to be developed to qualified municipal decision-makers and planners,” Gotz concluded.

The community action has entered the next phase. The residents propose their own comprehensive vision for development in the entire John and Bayview area.

“We are in favour of a redevelopment of the John and Bayview area, but the design and development must be the result of comprehensive planning that will make Thornhill an even better place to live” reads AWRA’s [webpage](#).



AWRA and other resident groups shared a possible vision of the Thornhill Square & Community Centre similar to Clarendon in Arlington, Va. (Image taken from McCaffery website on July 27, 2022)

They yielded the Urban Land Institute (ULI), a venerable U.S. institution, and [ULI's 10 principles for successful town centre development](#) for the plan. A new group on Nextdoor entitled “Thornhill Centre Amazing Developments” presents the conceptual vision plan and continues the lobbying.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: Reporter Irene Wong curious to know the backstage driver behind the curtain of Shouldice land purchase.

Irene Wong is a reporter for the Markham Economist & Sun and YorkRegion.com. Irene speaks English, Cantonese and Mandarin. Connect with her at iwong@metroland.com.

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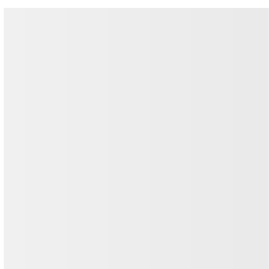
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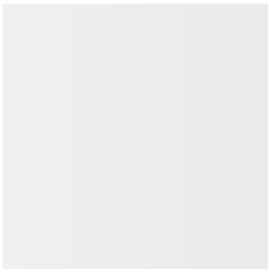


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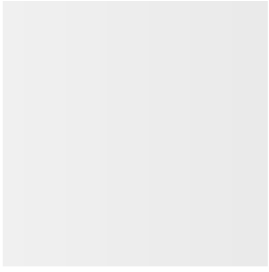
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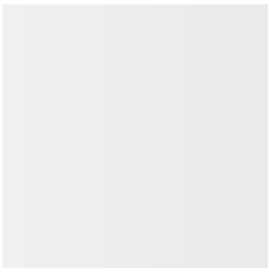
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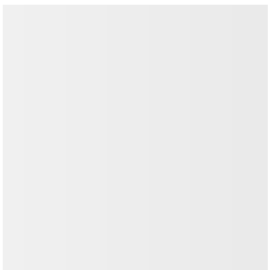
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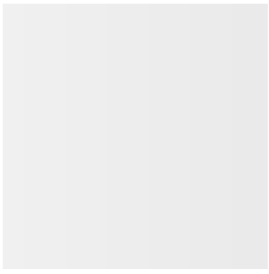
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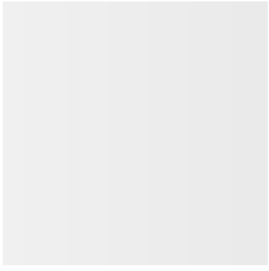
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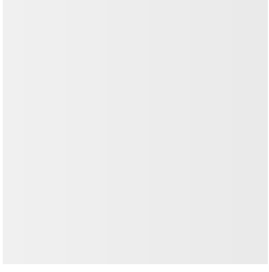
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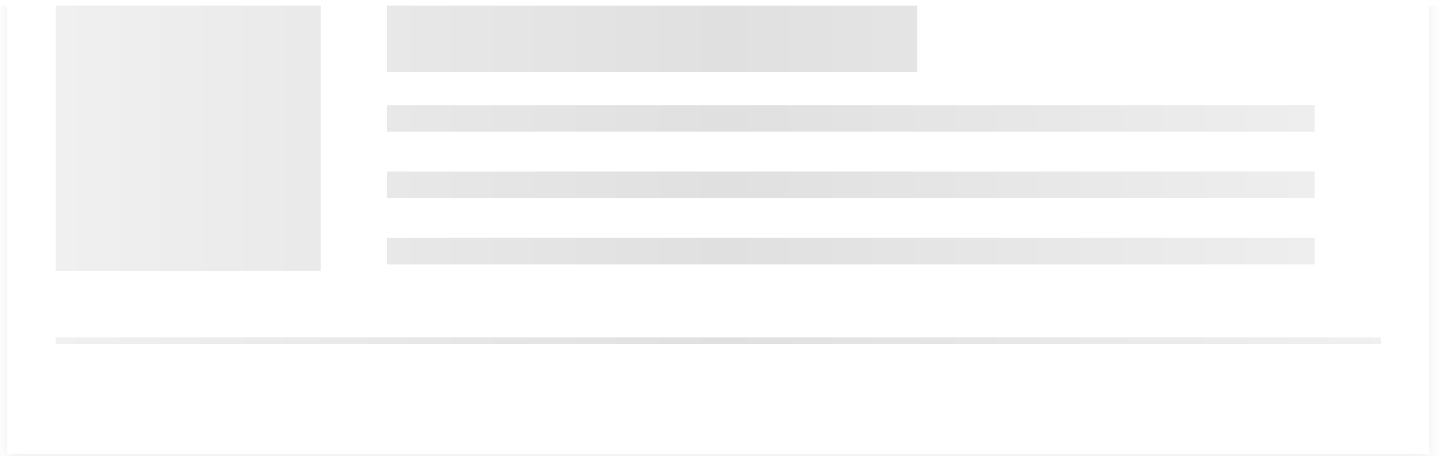
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