

Skunk at a Garden Party

BY SHERALYN ROMAN

Actively encouraging residents to come out and take part in democracy, in guiding the future of our community, is something that has been covered in this space before. One group in particular (Forks of the Credit Preservation Group FCGP) has been doing it well for some time now. Recently, at a packed Council meeting, with many more residents spilling into the overflow area, the importance of this group's efforts and the collective community voice was loud and clear. Unfortunately, while an encouraging sign, and I'd like to hope an influential one, for this audience member, the loudest voice of all seemed to be the thinly veiled threat spoken by the self-proclaimed 'skunk at the garden party.'

By now, unless you've been living under a rock (the kind of rock the Brazilian firm Votorantim wants to blast to kingdom come) you'll know what I am talking about. A public meeting to roll out proposed new aggregate policies took place last week, meant to be forward-thinking, environmentally responsible and to be policies that pave the way (irony intended) for future responsible aggregate extraction. I'm not sure there is ever a way to 'responsibly' source an excess of aggregate when we already have multiple pits and quarries dotting the Caledon landscape, particularly a quarry that proposes to blast below the water table, but nonetheless, that's what residents and Council had gathered to hear more about.

There is much to be written about the aggregate policy and no doubt my formally trained journalism colleagues will do so. Here's what stood out for me: at least initially, there was talk of some amendments that suggest hope for more sound policy and planning is on the horizon, but upon deeper reflection, I'm just not sure that's the case. Many of the delegates, including those from FCPG, expressed concerns that the draft policy around air quality is not clear enough, and that when it comes to water (with some area homes at risk of losing their well water supply and various of our watersheds and species within them at risk) the use of policy language that states aggregate operators would be held 'to an appropriate standard' is clearly not specific enough. In my opinion, perhaps even purposefully vague.

Delegates like Tony Sevelka spoke at length about the dangers of flyrock and the fact that no licence is required for those in charge of blasting. That seems about right for a process that involves ammonium nitrate and fuel oil that is capable of producing thousands of tons of broken stone at any one time. Yes, I am being sarcastic. Further concerns were expressed around the increased volume of truck traffic on already overcrowded, single-lane roads like Charleston Sideroad, never designed for truck traffic in the first place and further, on Highway 10 which already sees well over 3,000 trucks per day. OPP statistics have verified a significant increase in traffic accidents has already occurred 'what happens when yet more gravel trucks are on the road?' Sure, the proposed new policy references the construction of 'alternate routes,' and by-passes, but the consultant himself, during his presentation of the proposed new policies, remarked, 'but those will be expensive to build.' Two thoughts come to mind; charge a road tax to the industry who need the trucks to transport their goods and/or if we're really all that concerned about costs 'how do you place a value on human life when lost to a tragic accident with a gravel truck?'

Most of all, however, what raised the ire of myself and others, was the self-proclaimed 'skunk at a garden party,' who delegated at length on behalf of the aggregate industry. Accusing area residents of 'dismissing aggregate because you already have a house,' while trying to greenwash us into believing yet more aggregate in Caledon is good for the environment because it represents 'close to market aggregate extraction,' (presumably inferring less travel time/gas emissions or other so called environmentally friendly outcomes) is demeaning and dismissive. It assumes this is a simple case of 'NIMBYism' rather than representative of a careful, well-researched and coordinated effort by a group of dedicated residents concerned about the long-term environmental, species at risk and human costs of increasing aggregate capacity.

His other comments included a reminder to Caledon Council and residents of how much the aggregate industry 'contributes to the Caledon budget' (one figure quoted was a mere \$1.5 million) and there was certainly no reference to how many millions are taken in profit and not re-invested into the community.

Worse still, to this observer, was the comment that whatever action Caledon might attempt to take would have a trickle down impact on other municipalities across the province (that could be a good thing, no?) followed by the thinly veiled threat that the aggregate industry 'would not allow' Caledon to subvert the Province. The implication was clear to listeners that any effort made by our local Council to enact measures contrary to the rest of the Province would be fought by the industry and overruled at the Provincial level. When it looks like a skunk, smells like a skunk and spreads malodorous vile like a skunk, rest assured it's a skunk at a garden party indeed.

One last comment of note. Those engaged in current aggregate extraction taking place throughout Caledon have 'unlimited extraction rights,' meaning there is no end in sight to their pits and quarries and their ability to continue mining them. Another delegate, Nicola Ross, pointed out there is a current application by Lafarge (a pit already in existence) to expand their efforts resulting, conservatively, in an increase of 400+ more trucks on area roads each day. That's just one application, from just one of the 20+ existing licensed pits/quarries already operating in Caledon and before any consideration of the Votorantim application! It's numerically absurd and the statistics further suggest we already have 13x more aggregate that we will conceivably need over the next 100 years. Tell me again why we need a blasting quarry?