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THE REDEVELOPING FUTURE OF COPPER CREEK

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The concept of a possible residential community on half of Copper Creek, as submitted during the pre-application process

Could Copper Creek, one of the province's premier golf courses, be redeveloped into a residential community? City Life investigates.

Avid golfers in Vaughan know that when it comes to the city's best public courses there are only two heavyweights crossing swords for top spot: Eagles Nest and Copper Creek. But could one be dropping out of contention?

If you've spoken with anyone who frequents Copper Creek Golf Club over the past few months you may have heard some interesting information. There is buzz about drilling equipment near tees — testing soil, perhaps — and that at some point in the not-so-distant future a portion of the rolling hills and sweeping fairways that make this course so special could be replaced by the driveways and front lawns of a couple hundred houses. And such speculation isn't off the mark.

In April of this year, a pre-application meeting was held between the city and representatives of Copper Creek, where a concept was submitted that outlined an initial vision for a high-density neighbourhood on the western half of the golf course running adjacent to Highway 27.

That possible community would feature from 658 to 791 units, with lots ranging in size from 80 to 40 feet for detached homes. Space is also designated for lane townhomes and several four-to-six-storey low-rise buildings, likely condos. Nine holes of executive golf, as well as the existing clubhouse, would remain.

This, of course, is just a concept. It's not a detailed plan showing exact dimensions and lot sizes — nothing final. But imagining those majestic, tree-lined, river-crossing valley holes, where it feels like teeing off in the heart of Muskoka, being introduced by a view-stifling sea of bricks and two-car garages really dampens the magic. And who gets excited about an afternoon at a nine-hole course, anyway?

While this is just a concept, it still offers a glimpse into the possibilities being considered by Copper Creek's owners and their ambitions for this large swath of land. The issue is: they're not talking.

Both Fieldgate Homes and TACC Construction, the companies that own Copper Creek, are not interested in discussing the fate of their prestigious 18 holes, recently ranked 40th in the country by *Canadian Golf* magazine.

"We are in the very preliminary stages of our planning and as a result it is premature at this time to have any discussions regarding this project," Carlo Stefanutti of Fieldgate explained in an email response.

But even without their input, there is one assumption that can be made: there is serious **money** to be made.

It was reported in April that members of the York Downs Golf and Country Club, a course encompassing roughly 400 acres in the heart of Markham, agreed to sell to four urban development groups for a whopping \$412 million.

Clearly, there are a lot of zeros at stake. Development is big business in the GTA. Why wouldn't these landowners want to **cash** in on their investment?

John Young, general manager of Copper Creek, explains that the pre-application for redevelopment was submitted to do just

that: protect the **investment** of ownership should policies change in the future. However, “Nothing’s on the horizon anytime soon,” he says. Any development is probably seven to 10 years away.

Despite claims of temporal distance, this news has not sat well with a number of residents in the area. I spoke with several homeowners in Kleinburg Reserve on the boulevard, the manor-filled neighbourhood just south of Copper Creek, to gauge the temperature, especially of those who back onto the course.

One man bluntly summed up the displeasure: “I hate it, because we paid a premium for these lots here. Now we’re going to have houses backing onto our lots? That’s not good at all.”

The ping-pong of drivers and the view of lush fairways might be replaced by the chatter of evening socials and backyard patios. I believe kids today refer to this as “first-world problems.”

A bigger first-world problem is degrading value. Recent home listings in the area have shown prices ranging from \$2.2 million to over \$3.3 million for a four-bedroom, seven-bathroom. Vitriol is understandable when those investments could take a hit.

There are also concerns about what a high-density neighbourhood would do to traffic. Highway 27 is already bumper-to-bumper during mornings and evenings. What would another 1,200 or 1,500 people mean for travel time?

On the one hand, you can sympathize with these residents. The city designated that parcel of land as “OS2,” or “Open Space Park Zone.” It’s meant for things such as parks, cemeteries and, what currently stands, golf courses. They purchased homes in good faith knowing that the land immediately north was zoned particularly.

On the other: they’re not entitled to live beside a golf course. Golf courses can and have been redeveloped in the past — it happens. The **extra money** flowing in from additional residents might prove beneficial for businesses in Kleinburg proper, as well. And don’t the landowners of Copper Creek have somewhat of a right to decide what happens on their property? Cities grow, things change. *C’est la vie.*

But as Ward 1 councillor Marilyn Iafate notes, “Just because you think it’s a great idea doesn’t mean it fits.” Developments must be compatible with the existing community and considerate about how they will impact the area. They must also abide by the city’s Official Plan.

She explains that Vaughan spent three years and nearly \$400 million to come up with an Official Plan to meet the guidelines and the growth projections imposed by the province — a process the development community was part of. The Official Plan does not identify this area along Highway 27 as an intensification area. “If you listen to the residents, what they’re saying is we have an approved plan, abide by the approved plan,” she says.

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Iafate notes that most developers acknowledge the Official Plan and adhere to its parameters. But the city still consistently sees applications asking for changes. “At some point no is no, and that’s it. You have to live with it,” she says.

Ken Schwenger, president of KARA, the Kleinburg and Area Ratepayers’ Association, takes a diplomatic view on the matter. “We’re not anti-development,” he says. He respects TACC, specifically owner Silvio DeGasparis, for always being upfront with the community. “You might not like what he wants to do, but at least he’s coming at you straight on,” he says.

TACC gave a presentation to KARA members about the possible future of Copper Creek, and KARA in return gave TACC comments about the [current](#) proposal's makeup. KARA's now waiting for an altered plan before they take a formal stance.

"It's really for them to change to something more appropriate," Schwenger says. "Because not only is it not an area that's slated for development, it's not the type of development that's allowed."

He feels residents may be more receptive if the concept were similar to how the old Kleinburg Golf Course was handled, where high-end homes were built abutting other high-end homes — something that integrates well with the community, as opposed to the current high-density concept.

And the problem is not all on the developers. Developers can ask for whatever they want. "That's how our system works," Schwenger says. "But I think you can fault all of Vaughan and council for a lot of times not really adhering to what they have always pitched as being an important document." I.e., the city's Official Plan.

While the Official Plan is one hurdle any development at Copper Creek would have to overcome — needing both a green light from Vaughan's Site Development Application Approval Process and its land rezoned — a substantial issue is with the Greenbelt. About 10.6 acres of the redevelopment concept, including two-thirds of the 40,000-square-foot clubhouse, are situated on Greenbelt protected land. Under the current administration, the Greenbelt has never contracted.

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry are currently undergoing a co-ordinated review of the four provincial land use plans, including the Greenbelt Plan. This included an initial consultation of 17 town hall meetings and over 3,000 participants, as well as 1,500 written submissions, some regarding specific lands within those provincial plans.

But according to one ministry spokesperson, shrinking the Greenbelt isn't on the agenda. "Our initial view is that beyond growing the Greenbelt, there is little need to change the boundaries," they said.

This could prove problematic for Copper Creek's current plans, should the province stick to their guns.

All those possible bureaucratic obstacles aside, it's still early in the game — really early. These plans can all change at the drop of a hat and the developers have not moved beyond the pre-application phase.

Even though Copper Creek may be fated to lose half its course, Young explains that business will continue at the banquet facility and nine holes will still remain. "There will always be golf here at Copper Creek," he claims.

In what form? We'll have to wait and see. Until then, you might want get a round in while you can. Teeing off from that captivating 10th might not be the same with the Smiths gawking from their patio.

PHOTO BY CARLOS ARTURO PINTO

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