

Rezoning application in Melancthon raises concern

Farming investment firm Bonnefield Financial has applied for zoning by-law amendments on parcels of its land holdings in Melancthon Township. The land, previously owned by The Highland Companies, was the battleground for which residents fought long and hard to protect farmland and source water from aggregate extraction. It is not surprising that re-zoning applications by Bonnefield, that contain the clause "prohibiting any new dwelling on the retained lands," are raising eye brows and concerns among residents still feeling the loss of thirty homesteads wiped out by The Highland Companies as they cleared the way for their mega mine proposal.

Melancthon Mayor Darren White told the Free Press, "There are three applications, but only one large one." In layman's terms, White says, "From my point of view, Bonnefield is asking to join a number of individual farms with building lots into one large parcel and remove the ability to put a house on the property." White says he is not sure of their motivation, but notes that "farmland is taxed differently than the building parcel, so costs could be a factor by way of reducing the taxes."

Questions in Melancthon Council Chambers at the May 21st public meeting, expressed concern for the loss of small family owned farms, potential growth, and community. As far as development concerns go, White says the Township has "no indication that Bonnefield is interested in anything other than industrial farming opportunities on that one contiguous parcel."

Bonnefield, which holds tens of thousands of acres of farmland across Canada, acquired over 6000 acres of prime vegetable land in Melancthon in July 2013 under the motto "preserving farmland for farming." Since then, the Mayor reports, "Bonnefield has sold some of the individual properties, as well as some of the residential lots they had acquired. They also have worked with local landowners on some other land deals that will benefit local farming."

As a result of questions from Council and comments from the public, the company agreed to put their applications on hold, giving the Township time to look into options for retaining additional building lots. Bonnefield representatives stated that they understood the public concern and would work with the Township to be a good corporate neighbour.

Karren Wallace, whose family has farmed in Melancthon for decades, and was present at the meeting as an agent for her mother, Doris Wallace, said she "was really encouraged that Council and Bonnefield were on top of the issue before the meeting." Wallace submitted concerns that included: affordable housing, fiscal sustainability, strengthening community, Township representation at County Council and growth allocation mandates for Melancthon in Dufferin County's Official Plan.

North Dufferin Agriculture and Community Taskforce (NDACT) Chair, Shirley Boxem says the organization's interest in the rezoning issue centers on rebuilding "the homes destroyed by Highland Companies in Melancthon." NDACT is concerned the application would "deny construction of homes that had been there in the first place." Boxem says she agrees with Wallace's point that the "Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing works to promote a housing market that serves the full range of housing needs, protects tenants and encourages private sector building" therefore, permitting residential dwellings on the retained lands would support this initiative.

Board Member Carl Cosack says: "NDACT has a very constructive relationship with both Tom Eisenhauer (President of the company) and Bonnefield....As always, we will do our due diligence, but I trust that a resolution will be found that we can support and will be beneficial to all involved, including to the Township of Melancthon. Minister McMeekin (Municipal Affairs and Housing) is acutely aware of the special housing requirements in Melancthon and we look forward to his support for rebuilding houses that were removed by The Highland Companies."

After the public meeting with Bonnefield on May 21st, Wallace reported, "All parties were attempting to work toward a resolution that would be in the interest of both Bonnefield and the community." She said, "More companies should look to Bonnefield as a corporation that is a model example of true public consultation and community involvement."

"Other landowners in and outside the Township have done these types of re-zonings," said Mayor Darren White, "so, in general terms, it's not that uncommon in the age of large farming operations." He made the point, "In the future, if Bonnefield sold all or some of the parcel it could be returned to smaller farms without much effort." He said, "The fact that the company was willing to put things on hold, so we could gather some further information, does help to put my mind at ease a little."

By Marni Walsh