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Unchecked development

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?If you build it, he will come.?

That may just be a famous line from a well-known movie, but during the 1990s it was turned into a mantra in some business circles replacing ?he? with ?they.?

It was thought that if you made an investment and build something, people will use it and pay for it.

Of course, that doesn't always work and the theory was missing one basic business principle ? that being the ?need? for a service or product.

So, what if you do build something and no one comes? Well, you will probably have a disaster on your hands.

Development in Ontario is turning into a situation where the ?need? may not always be there but there is total disregard for that consideration.

You would probably be surprised to learn how little power your municipal government really has when it comes to determining the future development of your town and the path it will take.

I once had a discussion with a local mayor about a very unpopular development that was being planned. It was being built on questionable lands with a poor design more reminiscent of communist East Berlin than central Ontario.

He said, ?It doesn't matter what people think, if the Province wants it, it's going to happen.?

In other words, the Province tells municipalities what they will do ? it's a directive, not a request.

Recently there has been a change in the Provincial Planning Act, which affects Ministerial Zoning Orders legislation.

Minister's Zoning Orders (MZO) have been around for decades and for a good reason.

The MZOs were in place and intended to be used in areas that are remote and unincorporated and lacked a local government or population to make decisions.

The Province could step in and make a decision when there was no one else to do it.

The recent change in the Planning Act now gives the Ministry the ability to step in and give the thumbs up on a development whenever, and wherever, they choose ? and they have been choosing to do that a lot.

That means a development can be approved regardless of local concerns. As MZOs are issued without conditions ? the developer gets a thumbs up, and that's it ? meaning if they want to build on environmentally sensitive wetlands, they can.

If a developer decides to build in an area that is an unpopular choice, for any reason, and gets a push-back from the local population, they can now go around the usual process and appeal directly to the provincial government and get an approval to build.

This means organizations like Conservation Authorities ? who are charged with protecting sensitive land and waterways ? have no say in the matter ? and neither do you.

This whole situation leads to a lot more questions than answers.

Why is the Minister in charge of this suddenly giving the ?yes? stamp to so many developments that are being proposed on lands that are be rejected at the local level?

There are no conditions, no studies, no concerns ? just an approval to build.

I grew up in a house that was built in what was then a new development. My parents bought it as their first house as a newly married couple. It was built on an orchard.

Many of the homes still had pear trees in the back yard.

The area behind our house was filled with acres of cherry trees.

The region was a part of the Niagara Fruit Belt ? so called because the region had the right climate for growing tender fruit like cherries, plums, peaches, pears, and grapes.

It is only one of two areas in the entire country suitable for this type of food production.

That entire region on top of the Niagara Escarpment is now paved over and you're never going to see cherry blossoms there again.

I'm no ?tree hugger? in the sense that some people relate to as being totally anti-development at all cost.

Development is going to happen.

However, development needs to follow guidelines and rules that protect environmentally sensitive areas including wetlands and farmland.

It makes no sense to ?build so they will come? only to find those same houses underwater the next a storm floods an area already known to be a risky place to build.