

Caledon shares illegal land use struggles with Province, asks for support

By **ZACHARY ROMAN**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Town of Caledon is bringing its concerns about illegal land use in the municipality to the Province.

On August 13, Mayor Annette Groves, Ward 3 Councillor Doug Maskell, Ward 5 Councillor Tony Rosa, and Caledon's Commissioner of Community and Human Services Catherine McLean presented to the Province's Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy on the issue of illegal land use.

The Committee met at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum and Community Centre that day for public hearings on a study related to land use for unlicensed event venues.

Groves said there's a lot of illegal land use in Caledon and that while it's not a new problem, there's certainly been an increase in the amount of illegal land use in recent years.

"We've got some great people, but we also have a lot of bad actors, and we've seen an increase in the number of bad actors popping up in different areas? it's very disruptive to our residents," said Groves.

McLean said the two main types of illegal land use in Caledon are illegal event centres and illegal trucking yards. She said the two types of illegal land use create similar negative impacts like long-term environmental and infrastructure damage, risks to public safety, and disruption to residential communities.

McLean said Caledon residents are dealing with massive illegal truck yards operating 24/7. She said people are dealing with traffic safety issues caused by these truck yards, and that Caledon's roads themselves "in areas not designed to support large volumes of truck traffic" are becoming damaged.

"They're full of deep potholes and grooves, another safety hazard," she said.

Illegal event centres are causing residents to lose sleep, said McLean, as many event centres have loud music playing all night and even have fireworks shooting off.

"Despite our efforts, illegal truck depots are expanding with defiance? many operators consider legal fees and municipal fines a cost of doing business, and they're finding ways to circumvent violation notices by converting property ownership to delay prosecution," said McLean. "Just last week, I was reviewing a file that we're moving ahead with in the courts. The file dates back to 2007? 17 years. One of (our) officers' affidavits was 514 pages in length: 514 pages of notes, pictures, complaints, orders to comply, more pictures, more complaints? it just goes on and on."

McLean said the business in question has not been deterred by numerous prosecutions and has even grown over the years.

"This perception of impunity for illegal land use has important consequences. People who depend on us see this and believe we're not doing enough, and they're not wrong. Current municipal powers under Provincial law are not adequate to address this issue, so our ask of you today is that you add illegal parking and storage of commercial vehicles to the scope of your study, going beyond unlicensed event venues," said McLean. "We ask that you consider amending the Planning Act and Municipal Act to strengthen municipal enforcement powers, including enabling municipalities to physically bar entry to properties; increase maximum penalty amounts for individuals and corporations; and include all charges, orders, notices, prohibitions, injunctions and imposed fines on the title of a property. We need to do more together. Our residents are counting on us."

Maskell said when he became a Councillor he was astonished to learn of the inadequacy of current legislation to with illegal land use.

“Our tools have been maxed out in these situations and we're looking for support,” said Maskell.

Maskell said the people operating illegal event centres and trucking yards have absolutely no respect for the law.

“They are well aware that they have a three-to-five-year window to stay in operation before they can possibly be shut down? they have a well-oiled business model that they're operating under,” he said. “I feel that at the Town level, we're doing everything that we can possibly do in this situation, and I'm here today asking for the help of Provincial government, because it's not the good actors who are the problem; it's the bad actors, and we need to figure out a way that we can work cooperatively with the province to ensure that people, when they come to Caledon to live and to work and to play ? that those things are respected.”

Rosa said Caledon Council is unified in wanting to find a solution to the issue of illegal land use.

“We've really reached a point where we can no longer do this alone. We welcome the opportunity to have this dialogue today, and what we're really looking for is an opportunity to have some type of partnership with the Province,” said Rosa.

Groves said the Town of Caledon really wants the ability to be able to barricade illegal trucking yards so that trucks cannot drive in and out of them. McLean said an increase in fines for illegal land uses is badly-needed.