

Calls for protecting farm land in Provincial plans

By Bill Rea

Provincial planning documents do a good job of protecting certain lands, but do they do enough to protect farms?

That question was on the minds of several people Tuesday night as the Town of Caledon hosted a public session on provincial plan reviews.

More than 60 people were on hand for the session at Caledon Community Complex in Caledon East.

Tim Manley, senior policy planner with the Town, explained three provincial plans, the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservative Plan and the Greenbelt Plan, are all up for review next year. The aim, he said, is to determine what is and is not working when it comes to these documents, and if there's any way to make them more relevant. He added the Town will also be offering positions to the Province and was seeking public input on what that should be.

Manley pointed out most of Caledon is influenced by at least one of these plans, and they contain policies that affect land uses and development approvals. He added that since all three plans will be under review at the same time, this offers a chance for significant influence on the planning process.

?This is a very unique opportunity,? he remarked.

He observed that land-use planning impacts almost every aspect of people's lives, and helps shape communities. He described it as managing land and resources in a way that balances the interests of individual property owners with wider interests of the community.

These Provincial plans fall between Regional and municipal Official Plans when it comes to the hierarchy of planning tools in Ontario, Manley said, adding the Official Plans have to conform with these documents. He explained the Provincial Planning Act sets out ground rules, describing how land uses can be controlled, and who controls them. He also referred to the new Provincial Policy Statement (PPS), which came into effect last month, commenting that it contains overall policy direction aimed at building strong and healthy communities, promoting wise use and management of resources, and protecting public health and safety.

The three plans that are to be reviewed were each implemented by legislation. The Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act was passed in 1973, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act passed in 2001 and passage of the Greenbelt Act was in 2005. Development control on the Escarpment is handled by the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC), while the other two plans are administered at the municipal level.

People attending Tuesday's session were asked to address a variety of questions, such as whether the three plans are effective in their ability to achieve their respective purposes.

There were some people who maintained that there needs to be more protection specifically for farmland.

One woman observed NEC is a strong body when it comes to protecting land. But there were also observations that it could be strengthened. ?The Niagara Escarpment Plan could use more legislative teeth,? one person observed.

Another said there is little being done to protect the viability of family farms.

There were some comments that the input from Tuesday's session could help in that regard, although one man observed there weren't enough people out. He suggested greater use of social media to attract a younger crowd.

Debbe Crandall, representing Save The Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM), stressed the importance of people understanding the planning process and what has to be done to bring about change.

Another woman suggested some way to be found to educate new residents. She wondered, for example, if some official could visit people moving into homes that back onto conservation land to explain the implications of the rules that are in effect.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli observed that to make the effort really effective, it's important that people understand why the policies and regulations are in place.

Other questions put to participants included whether they thought the plans are lacking.

One woman commented the plans achieve their respective purposes, but at the expense of individual land owners.

Councillor Allan Thompson added there's no appeal process for rulings governing the Moraine or Greenbelt, as well as a lack of property owners' rights.

Mezzapelli called for greater clarity in the policies of the plans, adding there needs to be more consistency. He said some things are permitted in some areas and not in others.

He also observed the Greenbelt plan protects agricultural land, but presents problems when it comes to providing infrastructure to support farms.

Another man raised the issue of people who own property that was bought for investment purposes, but who can do nothing with it

because of Greenbelt rules. "We just feel frustrated," he said.

There were also comments that these plans don't go far enough when it comes to dealing with aggregate extraction.

Former councillor Ian Sinclair said there are a number of examples of people trying to undertake relatively minor projects who get bogged down with red tape. He cited an example of people trying to set up a farmers' market. "They're being treated like they're trying to put in Square One malls," he commented.

Another woman observed the boundary standards should be reviewed, as there's no clear word on how they were established.

"What we're doing is preparing to negotiate with the Province," Councillor Richard Whitehead observed.

He also said he gets a lot of complaints from residents who say the application process in a lot of cases is complicated, time consuming and expensive. He said a process needs to be set up that is simpler, but still offers the required protection.

When it comes to possible improvements, Sinclair suggested one plan that could be administered by municipalities, with the Province being able to appeal decisions that are "wacko."

Crandall argued there are appeals for the Moraine or Greenbelt plans available through the Ontario Municipal Board. That route isn't used often, and she argued that's a sign the policies are good.

Sinclair disagreed, arguing the acts creating the two plans specifically bar all forms of legal appeal.

Manely said planners would look into how possible appeals are.



Participants in Tuesday's meeting took part in round-table discussions to consider various questions.