

Concern developers might be over-represented in Whitebelt exercise

By Bill Rea

Public input is still going to be sought as the Town works of what it envisions for the Caledon's portion of the Whitebelt.

Town councillors recently received an update of the visioning exercise from Nick McDonald of Meridian Planning.

He said the process has been through its first phase, which introduced many of the factors to be considered in the process. They included natural and cultural heritage. Agriculture is an important consideration, since more of the Whitebelt is prime agricultural land. They also considered strategic employment areas, including where to put them in the long-term. McDonald said when it comes to employment lands, municipalities are allowed to plan beyond the 20-year horizon. Other factors included community structure, transportation, other land uses and preferred sequencing.

"We've got a lot of land to think about," McDonald told councillors.

He added the first phase included consultations and meetings with various groups, including the Peel Federation of Agriculture, Caledon Chamber of Commerce, etc. It also involved studying the several planning policies that are already in place.

The consultation included a open house that was held in November, at which several points were raised, including the importance of long-term planning, which he said is what the process is all about.

McDonald reflected that people attending the November session were asked to indicate, with sticky dots on a map, where they thought various types of development should go, such as residential, commercial, agricultural, etc.

In terms of residential, most of the preference was for lands west of Bolton. The rest, he observed, was south of the GTA West Corridor. Commercial and industrial development seemed centred around Tullamore and Mayfield West, and agriculture was more prominent north of the Corridor. McDonald stressed that exercise was just a case of some people expressing preferences. "this is not a scientific analysis," he said.

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy was concerned about the reliability of the information. She asked if there have been analysis of the people attending the meeting, wondering if developers might have been over-represented.

McDonald said they try to get an appreciation as to where people are coming from when they talk to them at such meetings, and they try to meet as many people as possible.

"The idea is to get as much input as possible and draw it all together," he said.

"Just out of curiosity, who placed those dots?" Councillor Annette Groves asked, curious about the ratio between the community and developers.

McDonald couldn't answer, adding if they forced people to identify themselves before placing dots, not many would get placed.

"It really is unscientific," he added. "It really is just a visual aid."

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli was also concerned about the dots on the map. He said there were lots of them on tables at the November meeting, so people could have voted more than once.

There has also been an on-line survey conducted since November, and McDonald again pointed out the options suggested from that are not to be taken as scientific. But the conclusions so far indicated most people responding support growth, but think it should be flexible and maintain options for future innovation. There were also calls to expand Tullamore for industrial uses, that settlement expansion should be near infrastructure and along major corridors, such as Airport Road. In terms of agriculture, the survey results show a preference for focusing these uses north of the Corridor, as well as alternative agricultural uses, like community greenhouses, etc. Other comments have suggested considering partnerships with post-secondary schools, encouraging agricultural tourism, separating non-compatible uses, that transportation improvements are needed to support development, etc. There have also been concerns expressed over what McDonald called "consultation fatigue," as well as this could be a costly and lengthy process.

There were some calls for no development in the Whitebelt, but he said they were in the minority.

Recalling the comments from the Peel Federation of Agriculture, McDonald said there was a belief that protected land should be decided by market needs. There were also calls to determine how much land in the Whitebelt is developable. As well, there were calls to keep taxes low, while maintaining a lifestyle that encourages people to move here. There were also comments that it's important to offer a variety of jobs to make Caledon an affordable place to live. Transportation issues were addressed, including the need for an east-west connection to handle increased volumes.

McDonald said comments from the Chamber of Commerce included calls to separate industrial from residential uses, and that only employment development be considered for the Tullamore area. There was also mention of the need to attract people to both live and work in Caledon. The Chamber agreed that an east-west connection is needed.

The second phase of the exercise will see the development of comprehensive list of factors to be considered. McDonald said a lot of

them have already been identified. There will also be an assessment on the needs for all land uses. As well, there will be a review of the infrastructure and transportation requirements. An interactive design-focused public workshop is in the works too.

McDonald said the exercise is seen to have the potential to protect agricultural operations, preserve and enhance the natural heritage system, identify and protect strategic employment lands, and plan for a complete and healthy community.

He also said there are known constraints in the process. They include operating around the boundaries of the Greenbelt and natural heritage features; the fact that there is designated prime agricultural land, but no determination of which lands might be less prime; traffic congestion because of the lack of an east-west connection and uncertainty about the future of the highway proposed for the Corridor.

Commenting on the Federation of Agriculture's call to let the market decide what lands are to be protected, Shaughnessy wondered who would determine market needs, and where that information would come from.

McDonald said the lands would always be subject to market conditions until they are protected permanently.

He also couldn't offer many insights on what's happening with the Corridor.

?There is a fairly strong silence coming from the Province on this whole issue,? he remarked, adding concern is wide-spread.

McDonald also told Councillor Doug Beffort that knowing where the proposed highway might go would provide some clarity, but there would be no guarantee as to when it will come.

Addressing the Corridor, Mezzapelli said it will have an impact, whether the highway is built or not.

McDonald commented that the province allocated numbers for population and employment for Peel, but he didn't know if the possibility of a highway had been taken into account.