

## Council votes against proposed spiritual centre, says location not right

SMVS Canada wanted to build centre near intersection of King Street and Centreville Creek Road

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Planning staff and Caledon Council do not agree with the proposed location for a spiritual centre.

At Caledon Council's April 16 Planning and Development Committee meeting, Councillors unanimously voted to refuse official plan and zoning bylaw amendments for a proposed spiritual centre near the intersection of King Street and Centreville Creek Road.

Council had previously deferred the matter at a February 13 Planning and Development Committee meeting.

Council's April 16 decision will come to a future Council meeting for final approval.

The spiritual centre was proposed by Swaminarayan Mandir Vasna Sanstha (SMVS) Canada, a Hindu faith organization.

A Town of Caledon staff report on the topic said the proposed centre was not consistent with the Region of Peel and Town of Caledon official plans.

'The proposal does not represent good planning nor is it in the public interest,' reads the report. 'It is recommended that Council refuse the applications.'

The centre was proposed on lands that are currently zoned agricultural, so the zoning would have had to be changed to permit the centre.

Kevin Bechard, a senior associate with IPS Consulting, which is managing SMVS' application, maintained throughout the process that the application for the centre represented good planning and that much work had gone into meeting necessary requirements.

At the April 16 meeting, Bechard said IPS Consulting's agricultural impact assessment determined the impact of the loss of agricultural lands would be 'negligible in terms of the overall context.'

Caledon resident Bhavesh Patel started a petition in support of the spiritual centre and it received over 1,300 signatures.

He told the Citizen he was inspired to start the petition as there's currently nowhere in Caledon for followers of the Hindu faith to gather. He said the proposed location for the centre was a beautiful one and that the centre would fill a much-needed gap in Caledon's cultural landscape.

Rushi Patel, a volunteer with SMVS and supporter of the petition and centre, noted the centre would be open to anyone of any faith, and shared that SMVS is a socio-spiritual and charitable organization that strives to give back to the communities it's in.

Regional Councillor Mario Russo said he sees the need for a spiritual centre in Caledon but said there's challenges because of the land use.

'With it not being in the urban boundary? with all the other land use restrictions and prohibitions, it makes it very challenging to support at this time,' said Russo. 'We're just not ready, the services aren't there.'

Ward 3 Councillor Doug Maskell said he'd be supporting Town staff's recommendation to refuse the proposal because Caledon should be preserving agricultural land.

'I don't think it should be any surprise that that was going to be deemed to be prime agricultural land,' said Maskell. 'The farmland that we have in that prime agricultural must be preserved for future generations.'

Regional Councillor Christina Early said the proposed centre is wonderful and does have a place somewhere in Caledon ' just not on the agricultural land that's not ready for it.

Ward 1 Councillor Lynn Kiernan agreed.

'It's not about the what, it's the where,' she said. 'They're not making any more farmland and we're using it.'