

?Lack of local democracy?: Protest planned against province's Bill 23]

EcoCaledon organizing protest at MPP Sylvia Jones' office

By Zachary Roman

Caledon residents concerned about the democratic process and the environment are planning a protest against the Provincial government's Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act.

EcoCaledon members Betty de Groot, Dan O'Reilly and Lucrezia Chiappetta have organized a protest to be held on November 25 at 1 p.m. at Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones' office in Orangeville.

People will be gathering around the office with signs to raise awareness about their concerns with Bill 23, said O'Reilly, adding all are welcome to join. There are many reasons as to why O'Reilly and EcoCaledon are concerned about Bill 23.

?First of all, it would kind of devolve regional planning down to lower municipalities, and some of these lower municipalities just don't have the resources or the planning stuff to deal with complicated issues,? said O'Reilly. ?It would severely restrict the power of conservation authorities.?

O'Reilly said the draft legislation would take the right away from ordinary citizens to make an appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal and restrict the amount of affordable housing units that a municipality could require a developer to have.

?It's not just the environmental issues,? said O'Reilly. ?It's a lack of local democracy.?

Chiappetta, EcoCaledon's co-chair, noted another big part of Bill 23 would be the elimination of development charges. These are fees that municipalities can require developers to pay in order to build parks and infrastructure to service their developments.

She added that the government is looking to get rid of the green development standards that many municipalities have been working diligently towards implementing. She noted that green development standards often cover affordability as well, and said the two go hand in hand. Chiappetta is worried that without green development standards, municipalities won't be able to hold developers accountable to build the types of housing that are actually needed.

A Government of Ontario press release states the Bill will help achieve the following goals which will help get ?more homes built faster?: building more homes near transit; supporting affordable and rental housing; freezing, reducing, and exempting fees for attainable, affordable, and non-profit housing; streamlining bureaucratic processes; improving the Ontario Land Tribunal; cracking down on speculation; and more.

However, critics such as EcoCaledon, say Bill 23 will do nothing but tear up the greenbelt, encourage sprawl, and benefit developers. Chiappetta explained that on November 21, a coalition of over 125 groups including farmers, housing advocates, urban planners, environmentalists and community groups united to release a seven-page statement in firm opposition of Bill 23.

?The government's scheme will not create more housing or improve affordability but will supercharge expensive and wasteful urban sprawl, undermine environmental protection, threaten farmers, prevent the transformation of existing sprawl communities into climate resilient communities and transfer money from taxpayers to land speculators and developers,? said the Coalition in a statement.

Max Hansgen, President of the National Farmers' Union ? Ontario, was quoted in the statement and said the proposal to remove farmland from the greenbelt will both harm farmers and reduce their ability to supply Ontarians with the food they need.

?These proposed actions would also take away farmers' rights to appeal development decisions that could harm their land and farm

businesses and would make it much easier for land speculators to turn irreplaceable farmland into unsustainable urban sprawl," said Hansgen.

Chiappetta said there's already enough land designated for development in Ontario, and that even after that there's whitebelt land that could be potentially designated for development.

"So, why are we jumping already to [planning to] opening up 7,400 acres of our greenbelt?" she asked.

Doug Ford and the provincial government had promised in the past to not touch the greenbelt.

O'Reilly said he's hoping for a good turnout at the November 25 protest, and said another action interested people can take is to call or email Jones' office to let her know their opposition to Bill 23. EcoCaledon is hoping to see support from members of Caledon's recently sworn in Council at the November 25 protest.

Since the protest will be held in Orangeville, de Groot said EcoCaledon is looking forward to unity from community members and groups from both Dufferin and Caledon at the protest.