

Mayor Thompson talks about the 'planning fiction'

By Constance Scrafield

The Mayor of Caledon spoke his mind during an interview with The Citizen earlier this week in a discussion about the Province's Places to Grow planning document that lays out a pre-determined shape of the future not only for Caledon, but for the entire province.

Sandra Sharpe, executive assistant to the Mayor, sat in with us.

'We have to think smarter,' Thompson told us. 'They're not looking at how to make it right.'

'They're planning to paint everything with one brush,' he added. 'Anyone knows you can't do that.'

An elected official but, also a landowner, Thompson is particularly concerned about: 'They've created municipalities out of land where there aren't the people used to dealing with the Province. The challenge is the navel gazing ' they're putting prime agricultural land into (development) play out of ignorance.'

In the U.S.A., there is a better understanding of the importance of arable land. 'You can't get out of high school without taking courses in agriculture,' he said.

'The Europeans know what it is to go hungry,' he said, referring to those who learned that caring for farm land is essential to good planning.

'The Province may mean well ' to me, the one challenge is leap-frogging,' he continued. 'As soon as 'green' was established, prices began to soar and the developers panicked to buy up the land.'

'The Green Belt is fiction,' he said bluntly. 'The Green Belt is propaganda with no reality to it.'

He related the story about a Portuguese gentleman, whose children have grown up here, going to university and doing very well.

'He told me that he is a successful man,' Thompson related, 'He said, 'Yes, I'm very proud of them, but I am successful because I own this house.' He had come from Portugal, 13 generations of family living on a landowner's farm. But after 13 generations, he owned his own home. That's the Canadian dream. And what we've done is make this land unaffordable for our kids.'

The resistance to true consultation is a source of frustration, as is the role the environmentalists play. We mentioned the open house the Province brought to Caledon earlier in the year which outlined the proposed Places to Grow planning which was run by people who had no answers to questions and were not listening to comments.

This is more generally the case than otherwise, the Mayor commented.

'As much as they consulted, but they weren't listening,' he commented. 'To me, this is planning fiction.'

'I've been pushing to bring in broadband,' he told us. 'We need to pay attention to what is going on.'

The proposed GTA West Corridor, cutting through Caledon to connect Highways 400 and 401, is another point of interest.

Certainly, it will impact on farmland, but understanding the problems and needs of the farming community is important. Thompson was clear in his opinions.

'Farmers need it,' he said. 'Over 74 per cent of the traffic on Town roads is commuters, not residents. We need the infrastructure.'

What they're proposing is not good, but it's better than nothing. We need to get the farm products to the market.'

'You can design and build just about anything,' he added. 'There are lots of highways built like bridges.'

This would be the better design for a major motorway crossing the countryside from Nobleton.

Foresight for all aspects of 'community living' is far from complete, the Mayor worries. Likewise, the omission of green energy: geothermics and solar panels, are examples of concerns. The increase in intensity of population within built up areas is not well thought out.

In the case of the Mayfield West development, Thompson noted, 'We didn't build the roads wide enough for parking and the back yards are too small.'

For Thompson, local input is essential to get planning right in any given area. Each region has differences and one plan cannot fit all of them.

'The local politicians put themselves up and the Province isn't listening to them either,' he remarked. 'The Province uses the environmental agenda to their own advantage.'

'You can't protect something you don't understand,' he added.

This business of bending information to take on what is and is not good for the environment is too often manipulated to suit the needs of proponents of specific projects or, indeed, those who object to them.

'If the concern was true,' he commented, 'you would see geothermics, but you don't. They should be looking at this as 'sprawl' ' what's good and bad about it ' what are the necessities.'

Of all the rush to build tight, multi-storey housing in order to accommodate the heightened numbers of souls per acre, as it were, too much is being put on hold, not considered in advance.

As Caledon's Mayor pointed out, "What about medical facilities? What about seniors when we're building three-storey townhouses? What about post-secondary education? Is there a place for a college to come?"

Regardless of how well the Town of Caledon has managed both its development and the environment, the new Provincial plan takes away most of the municipal authority over development across Ontario. "Places to Grow has taken over the guidelines," he said. Former Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion recently "pulled all the mayors across the GTA to address the Province. We'll see what happens."

A recent Round Table was held at the Dufferin County Museum and Archives (DCMA) where members of the arts, media and political communities attended to discuss making Headwaters a more vibrant destination through cooperation of all.

We touched on this ambition and Thompson remarked, "It's happening. There are three cideries and a new brewery. Things are all starting to happen now. This is a huge growth area. Downey's is one, but there will be others. The arts culture isn't business. You need the populace to come to them. The problem is the silo mentality. Collaboration is the key "how do we build on our strengths?" About the whole picture, he insisted, "Let's have everybody at the table to talk about it. You don't have to build it all today."