

Optimism over update land-use plans

By Bill Rea

There's a lot of positive reaction to the results of the reviews of the land-use plans governing much of Southern Ontario, including locally.

Mayor Allan Thompson said he liked a lot of what he saw, but was somewhat distressed that there was no announcement regarding the GTA West Corridor.

Four updated land use plans were released by the Province last Thursday: The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Greenbelt Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Niagara Escarpment Plan. The Province has announced these documents are being updated in such a way that protects the environment, while creating vibrant communities that are healthy and sustainable.

The changes are aimed at building compact, complete communities with ranges of housing options that better connect transit to where people live and work; retaining and attracting jobs; supporting a thriving and agri-food sector; strengthening protections of natural heritage and water resource systems while reducing greenhouse gas emissions; providing public open spaces; and helping municipalities better prepare to minimize the negative impacts from a changing climate.

There was some give and take, Thompson observed the following day.

He pointed out the changes call for delinking employment lands when it comes to reaching density targets, an issue that had been concerning the Town for some time.

One size doesn't fit all, he remarked, adding the changes are going to allow for more flexibility for municipalities to figure out how to make their communities work. He also said the Town is working on achieving its growth and intensification targets, and factors like the Bolton Residential Expansion Study (BRES) will allow for more intensification.

It wasn't all perfect, as far as Thompson was concerned. He said the changes keep a lot of planning authority with the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC), rather than localizing it with municipalities.

Thompson said he himself asked if they were planning to hire more staff at NEC. They hadn't thought of that, he said.

And a lot of the Town's planning is stalled until there's a decision on the GTA West Corridor, and Thompson said he's heard through other sources that there's not going to be any action on that file until April of next year at the earliest.

Basically, they're not doing anything until after the election, he said.

Thompson admitted he was peaved that he had received no official notification.

Why couldn't the Minister, out of respect, send the mayor a letter? he wondered. My residents deserve better.

This region will continue to experience a lot of growth in the coming years, so we need to be wise about the way we plan and build our communities, Municipal Affairs Minister Bill Mauro said. These revised plans provide a smarter approach by making more efficient use of land, resources and infrastructure so that we can protect our environment, preserve precious farmland, boost our economy, address climate change and develop smart, sustainable, transit-supportive communities.

The updated Niagara Escarpment Plan will help shape the future of this world-renowned region for the next 10 years, continuing the legacy of the Niagara Escarpment as a great place for Ontarians to enjoy, Natural Resources and Forestry Minister Kathryn McGarry commented.

These plans provide a framework for future growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, former Toronto mayor David Crombie, who chaired the advisory panel looking into the reviews, observed. I congratulate the government for the work it has done. These changes will help curb sprawl, encourage the development of more complete communities, support more productive agriculture and put the region on a course to more sustainable growth.

The Greater Golden Horseshoe is forecasted to grow by approximately four million people over the next 25 years and will be home to more than 13.5 million people, working in 6.3 million jobs by 2041.

There were positive comments from other agencies, although some questions do remain.

Changes to Greenbelt settlement areas raised questions about the Province's commitment to end urban sprawl.

There is no shortage of land for housing with many thousands of acres pre-approved for development across the region, observed Caledon resident Debbe Crandall, policy director at Save the Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) Coalition. The province pulled back from freezing urban boundary expansions at this stage. We will be closely watching to ensure that new clarity in the plans will eliminate ongoing land speculation on prime farmland, important natural spaces and the edges of rural communities. Our fight will continue.

The coordinated review was coloured by a dramatic attempt by the development industry to misrepresent the Greenbelt's role in

limiting housing supply and increasing prices, according to EcoSpark.

“The Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt have increased the prosperity of those living within the GGH,” commented Joyce Chau, executive director of EcoSpark. “I hope today's announcement marks an end to this inaccurate rhetoric. The government needs to step up and get to the important task of growing the Greenbelt to protect vulnerable water supplies that are threatened by development pressures in communities like Simcoe and Brant County.”

There were also concerns that proposed policy changes in the Greenbelt and Moraine include significantly weakening protections for the habitat of endangered species.

“We are taken aback that policy safeguards for our most vulnerable plants and animals were removed,” Dr. Anne Bell, Ontario Nature's director of conservation and education, said. “On one hand we're pleased the government has committed to protecting the Greater Golden Horseshoe's natural heritage system. On the other hand, if the policies don't protect species at risk in the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt, where is there left for those species to go?”

The announcement that Ontario's Greenbelt will remain protected and that more farmland, water sources and sensitive natural areas will be included under its expansion plan was good news for Environmental Defence.

“Growing the Greenbelt to better connect urban and rural communities through urban river valleys, adding coastal wetlands and updating agricultural policies are positive signs the government understands the importance of keeping our farmlands, forests, wetlands safe and sustainable,” commented Tim Gray of Environmental Defence.

He was also pleased there were few changes to the boundaries of the original Greenbelt, and no swapping of land.

“Processes to grow the Greenbelt are clear indicators that despite intense developer pressure, the province has stayed strong in its commitment to a prosperous and sustainable future,” he added.

Gray also said more needs to be done to stop urban sprawl.

“The Growth Plan reforms stopped short of freezing urban boundaries for the next 10 years – the action most needed to show that a new approach to urban growth has arrived,” he stated.

Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation issued a statement acknowledging the Province has reinforced the Greenbelt's most important legacy – its permanence.

“The Greenbelt has withstood immense pressure from some developers throughout this Review who want to continue to build inefficient, sprawling housing on prime farmland, with little thought to the ecological health of the region,” the Foundation's statement said. “We are pleased the government will grow the Greenbelt, not turn it into a Swiss cheese belt by agreeing to the over 700 requests to remove land from its protection.”