

Passionate environmentalists spark public discussion

By Mark Pavilons

Environmentalists are anything but low key.

That was evidenced last Wednesday night as a panel of experts revealed their genuine passion for environmental issues in this province.

Four remarkable individuals led a public discussion on the state of Ontario's environmental protection, during a forum hosted at the Kingbridge Centre, put on by the Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT).

The event was put together to inform residents about the importance of the 2015 reviews of major pieces of legislation – the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan and Greenbelt Plan.

Erin Shapero, coordinator of the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance, said her 80-member organization runs across the Greenbelt and they welcome all coordinated efforts and new members. They are currently working on policy recommendations for the Greenbelt, examining high-level issues.

Environmental lawyer and advocate David Donnelly, who does a great deal of pro bono work for citizens' groups, said the boundaries for those major plans are not ecological boundaries and are not doing their job. If you look at a map of the Greenbelt for instance, there are several "irrational" geometric boundaries, likely for political reasons. Geological features don't follow straight lines, so one of the priorities, as the 2015 review of these plans draw near, is to re-examine those boundaries.

He also pointed to the need to look at natural heritage planning. Very few natural heritage features – headwaters, woodlots, wetlands – are catalogued or protected. Much is lost when people blindly pave over paradise. He did point out that roughly one-third of Halton is protected, but there's little in the way of similar efforts in Simcoe or Dufferin.

A comprehensive mapping of natural heritage features is another top priority.

Aggregate operations are still permitted in many parts of Ontario, including those environmental lands. Donnelly would love to see a ban on aggregate mining in the Greenbelt and Oak Ridges Moraine.

The province is way too permissive when it comes to creating infrastructure. Big pipes (water and wastewater systems) are akin to urban sprawl.

While most people concentrate efforts at ground-level conservation, Donnelly noted there's a danger lurking – levels of carbon in the atmosphere.

The global concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere – a primary driver of climate change – has reached 400 parts per million (ppm) for the first time in recorded history. Donnelly is sounding the alarm bells, noting if it hits 450 ppm we will "lose control of our planet and atmosphere" perhaps by the end of this century. He doesn't want his children to suffer the consequences of such actions, stressing the need for "carbon planning."

Caledon's Debbe Crandall, one of the founders of Save The Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM), pointed to the successful example and model of the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE), something all environmental groups need to follow.

Bob Patrick, former CONE president, said more than 100 forest plots are being monitored by his coalition and this data will be used during the plan review process. The NEPlan is based on watersheds and years of expertise has given the Escarpment groups sound footing. Many environmental groups see them as the go-to organization.

Crandall pointed out there has been a major unintended consequence of infilling development in Toronto, namely the dumping of fill into the region. Led by STORM, the Ontario Soil Regulatory Task Force is an umbrella group looking at this very issue.

Crandall noted one of the biggest failings in the system is the government slapping down legislation and walking away. "We're trying to get us all on the page," she said.

Caledon resident Barb Shaughnessy wanted to know why individual citizens are burdened with the responsibility of defending environmental plans at the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB).

Donnelly, who's represented many citizens' groups at OMB, said tax dollars go to "expert planners" and unfortunately some decisions are overturned by councils, leading to OMB appeals, which are both costly and time-consuming. He said many municipalities are not "savvy enough" to be pro-environment.

King Township has a reputation as being the first council to stand up to developers and fight for its green space at OMB. "I'm shocked that this doesn't happen more often," Donnelly observed.

He agreed the onus should be on the province, which has a vested responsibility. The feds, too, need to ante up. The burden shouldn't fall on average residents who have to hold fundraisers just to argue their case at OMB.

"We need to stop bake sale justice planning in Ontario," he said.

Donnelly went as far as suggesting that developers who try to bully residents with what's known as 'slap suits' have their applications frozen.

George Puccia, president of Stewards of the Moraine, pointed out his group spent a lot of time and money fighting an application for a banquet hall on the moraine. They were victorious. He wanted to know how citizens can put more teeth into the legislation and avoid frivolous applications.

Donnelly said Ontario does have the legislation. There is nothing in the world like the Greenbelt Plan and it only has to be improved, strengthened and enforced.

Shapero said during the municipal election campaign period, citizens can get more engaged and raise these very issues with their candidates. She encouraged residents to pin down their candidates at every opportunity.

Crandall noted there are growing partnerships leading up to the 2015 reviews and she's optimistic and encouraged that public engagement is at its height.

This review, she said, will take place out in the open.

'I think we can crack this nut,' she said.



Caledon resident Debbe Crandall joined environmental lawyer and advocate David Donnelly, Ontario Greenbelt Alliance Coordinator Erin Shapero and Bob Patrick, former 'president of the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment, at last week's panel discussion. Photo by Robert Brown