

Provincial panel hears lots of ideas for review of plans

By Bill Rea

The reviews of the Province's various land use plans are drawing lots of interest, and plenty of differing opinions.

Some 400 people were on hand for the Regional town hall meeting last Thursday at the Royal Ambassador Event Centre near Caledon East.

The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, Greenbelt Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Niagara Escarpment Plan are all currently up for review. The reviews are being run by an expert panel, led by former Toronto mayor David Crombie.

Northumberland-Quinte West MPP Lou Rinaldi, Parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, told last Thursday's crowd they were hoping to pick everyone's brain.

"It's really important to the government that we have a fulsome discussion," he said, adding it was a chance to share ideas.

"Caledon is a vibrant area from agricultural lands in this area," Rinaldi remarked.

He also stressed these reviews represent a historic event, as he reflected these plans are award winning and internationally recognized.

Maya Harris, of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH), told the crowd the plans are aimed at protecting important agricultural land and water resources.

The Greenbelt, she said, involves the countryside, as well as resources and recreation opportunities. Harris also said it's one of the world's largest and best protected greenbelts. She added there has been progress in protecting the lands, but there's room for improvement.

The discussions at the meeting were divided into questions, with the participants breaking into groups to discuss them individually. Some of those groups reported back at the end of the session.

One question was how can the plans better support the long-term protection of agriculture lands, water and natural areas?

The suggestions that came up included having clearer lines of authority when it comes to the various levels of government.

One man observed the Greenbelt was supposed to protect farmers, but it hasn't. He pointed out, too, that local municipalities have to deal with traffic passing through between the developed areas to the north and south, while the local authorities have to pay to maintain roads, etc.

One woman stated that intensification should be mandated in urban areas, while all prime agricultural land in the Greenbelt is protected.

Another woman called for harmonization of the language in the various plans, mentioning the possibility of an umbrella plan to cover the others.

One man called for the plans to include incentives to protect the land and water resources.

Another man commented that protecting the agricultural land is "only a first step." They also have to protect the farmer.

Another question dealt with how can the plans be strengthened to ensure communities make the best use of key infrastructure, such as transit, roads, sewers and water?

One man referred to the need to harmonize the various plans, while one woman mentioned the need to consolidate plans to make them simple and easy to enforce.

There were also calls for more commercial infrastructure, as well as more enforcement of truck routes and better and more frequent public transit.

Addressing that issue, one woman called for having the study areas made more specific, along with more coordination between levels of government.

She added the Greenbelt legislation needs to be better understood.

One of the other questions dealt with how can the plans continue to support the design of attractive, livable and healthy communities that are accessible to all at all stages of life?

One man stated it's essential to have public transit, so people have a way of getting around without their cars. He also called for more affordable internet access to help everyone "travel the information highway."

One woman called for a mixture of housing types, reflecting diversity and flexibility.

Another called for more green space, as well as integrating communities with natural heritage.

Another question was aimed at addressing how the plans can better support the development of communities that attract workers and the businesses that employ them.

One man suggested allowing more flexible zoning in certain areas.

Another said the plans should be more focused on implementation, as well as calling for provisions of a more diverse housing mix. He also said the plans should allow for more rural economic development.

Another man brought up the GTA West Transportation Corridor, which traverses Caledon. He said there has to be study of all necessary servicing requirements in the area, including employment lands both north and south of the corridor. He also wasn't sure if there's much of a need for retail land, considering the growing popularity of on-line shopping.

In dealing with how the plans can help address climate change, one woman commented on the need to act, rather than just recognize it. She also commented on the need to limit infrastructure to invite the use of non-greenhouse gasses.

Another woman called for expanding the Greenbelt and freezing urban boundaries. She also called for the creation of more local employment opportunities to discourage people from driving to work. As well, she spoke to the need to address other pollutants than carbon dioxide.

Other issues raised at the meeting included whether spiritual leaders from the Aboriginal communities had been consulted. Adam Redish, of MMAH, said there has been a focus on Aboriginal engagement strategy.

Addressing the timelines of the review, Redish said the consultation period will be running until late May. After that, he said the panel will be going through the material, with the aim of presenting a report to the government in September.

There will be more consultation in the second phase of the project, with more public consultation.

Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson observed that Caledon is impacted directly by all these plans, so he said the challenge is harmonizing all the demands, since the different plans have different policies.

"They're all talking different languages," he said, adding it's frustrating for planners and municipal leaders.

That was an issue that a couple of other people raised from the floor.

Another man, who lives in northwest Caledon, complained about the increase of estate residential housing. "What a waste of land!" he declared, adding they should be curtailed in areas where they're planned for the future.

A Palgrave woman called for the enforcement of policies.

"Policies that are not enforced are just words on a piece of paper," she said. "Policies have to be enforced."

Former Caledon councillor Richard Paterak observed that about 78.5 per cent of Caledon is in either the Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment or Oak Ridges Moraine Plans. He wondered if the Province was going to help the community filling the infrastructure needs that will be brought on where growth is restricted