

Public meeting on Torbram Road development raises questions from all sides

By Rob Paul

On January 17, a public meeting was held virtually regarding 12245 Torbram Road.

The topic of focus for the meeting was a proposed Official Plan Amendment, Zoning By-law Amendment, and Draft Plan of Subdivision applications.

An applicant (Rice Commercial Group on behalf of Tullamore Industrial GP Limited) applied for an Official Plan Amendment to expand the settlement boundary and re-designate the lands from Prime Agricultural Area and Environmental Policy Area to Prestige Industrial, General Industrial and Environmental Policy Area.

The proposed Draft Plan of Subdivision seeks to pave the way for a development of an industrial park consisting of four industrial blocks, a future development block, a stormwater management pond, environmental block, and internal streets. In total, the development is planned to include 12 industrial, warehouse and distribution buildings, with a total area of approximately 458,475 metres (4,934,983.83 feet).

Rice Group is a recognized developer of properties in the GTA and is committed to developing high-quality retail and commercial developments with the philosophy of developing properties where people work.

We see great opportunities in bringing employment lands to the market and our objective is, in all cases, to continue to own these properties after they're developed, said Aarthi Thaya, Rice Group Development Manager and project lead. As such we become proud members of the communities we invest in and take on an active role in its continued growth. Our site in Caledon is located north of Mayfield Road and between Torbram and Airport Road, it's approximately 150 hectares in area. We're proposing to develop this site as an advanced logistics and distribution industrial park. Through an Official Plan Amendment, Zoning By-law Amendment, and Draft Plan of Subdivision applications we're looking to transform these lands from agricultural to prestige industrial while maintaining our Greenbelt lands. We've been working diligently with the Town of Caledon, Region of Peel, and the Conservation Authority to appropriately plan our proposed development to ensure we're maximizing benefits to the community that we're now members of, through job creation, sustainable practices, and positive ecological offsetting.

The proposed development would include (along with 458,475 metres of industrial/warehouse/distribution space within 12 buildings) 1,081 loading spaces, 3,877 car space, 1,233 trailer parking spaces, two roads with a 26-metre right-of-way, and a 10-metre-wide stormwater runoff.

Currently under the Caledon Official Plan, the land is designated for agricultural land, but is being considered as a potential employment area if developed by the Region of Peel Council. The proposed zoning by-law amendment is seeking to rezone the lands with site specific provisions to a prestige employment zone with exceptions and environmental protection in order to maintain the lands for open space purposes.

These lands are a significant land holding; these lands are contemplated as part of the Region's process to be included in the future community area for employment planning purposes a process that's underway, said Ryan Guetter, Senior VP at Weston Consulting. This is what the Region of Peel is currently considering, and the lands are identified as part of a new community area and are proposed to be in a new employment area. The lands are contemplated for that purposed by the Region. At the Caledon Official Plan level, they're presently in the prime agricultural area designation. It's intended to be for advanced distribution and warehousing uses (if developed) and would be connected by a public road network. I'd simply note that we have a provision for protection of the Greenbelt area lands. We've proposed a planned subdivision to create separate blocks, accessed by a public road network (23 blocks in total with four industrial blocks, Greenbelt block, stormwater management block over exactly 149.37 hectares).

The plan is projected to account for multiple monetary benefits for the Town, including \$113 million in development charges, Planning Application fees in the order of \$5.2 million, \$9.5 million to \$10 million in annual property tax revenue, \$795 million in total GDP value-added to the Canadian economy, and \$306 million in government revenues across Canada.

'It's important to note there's a number of significant financial benefits in the form of development charges, fees, construction value, etc.,' said Guetter. 'There's going to be a significant number of jobs and through the Regional process identifying jobs forecasted for the Region and the Town. We're seeing the potential for 5,900 jobs both direct and in-direct. On the site itself, there could be over 5,000 jobs created here, which is exciting and would contribute well to the Town and Region in its fulfilment of employment growth.'

With the environmental aspect of the development, a key portion, the consulting team has met with the TRCA (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority) for meetings, site visits, and comments both virtually and in-person eight times since June 2, 2021.

'Our team initiated site visits back in the spring of 2021 and completed a full sweep of ecological inventories, including wetlands, fisheries, vegetation, tree inventory, breeding birds, reptiles,' said Shelley Lohnes, Ecologist with GEI Consultants. 'Through those studies we did identify early on in the site visit stage that some of the larger ponds were actually created by earth berms to provide ponding for farm cattle and irrigation and they were at risk of failure. Our first call was to TRCA to initiate that conversation because of the large size of the berms and their risk of failure, and they provided a substantial barrier for fish movement up stream. Our consultation began at that phase, and we provided updates to them at every juncture and they've been on-site several times.'

During the public meeting, resident and climate change, water, and environmental advocate Kathleen Wilson spoke and shared a presentation.

'With this application I was expecting an MZO (Minister's Zoning Order) to go through, I don't know how we're having a public meeting with an MZO and no staff reports, but this is environmentally sensitive and prime farmland which doesn't leave itself for thousands of tractors, trucks, and warehouses to live upon,' she said. 'I have a concern that we're pushing for an Official Plan Review before the actual Regional review is done. Even in the planning report it says, 'the lands are designated as prime agricultural land and environmental policy area which does not permit industrial use.' And the Minister and the Council of a municipality are supposed to protect ecological systems, including natural areas, features and functions. This year, our groceries have gone up 20 per cent and we've got a lot of farmland and environmentally sensitive land in Caledon up for development and I'm really concerned about it.'

Wilson says significant habitat of endangered species will be wiped out for the warehouses and 609 tree will be replanted with 918 saplings.

'Mature trees take a lot of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, and they do protect a lot of bats and birds who live in them and we're just wiping them all out in this corner of Caledon to put in more warehousing,' she said. 'There's no sense of any climate change emergency with the accepting of this actual application. I really do see this as the death of our food supply by a thousand cuts, or warehouses. I've been tracking the number of applications converting prime agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands by Wards. As of June, we have almost 2,635 acres of prime agricultural and environmentally sensitive land being converted to allow sprawl. I'm not seeing a net ecological benefit along the Mayfield Road area for all these warehouses.'

Caledon environmental activist Jenni Le Forestier also spoke at the meeting about a lack of transparency from Council on decisions regarding land in the Town being developed on.

'Tonight's meeting has been framed as if it's a public meeting so that there's the appearance of complying with the Planning Act so that legal requirements to meet with the public are met, however, the reality is that this meeting is not respecting the Planning Act,' she said.

?The proponent has included a request for a zoning order on the same agenda and the by-laws for rezoning are already drafted and included. Perhaps, that has become standard practice, but it certainly doesn't inspire confidence that a decision on this application hasn't been decided already by Council and Staff. Members of the public were and still are outraged that Council supported an MZO for a warehouse which [is] between Greenbelt fingerlings outside of the settlement boundary and ahead of MCR. That yet another MZO is being requested for this industrial application, this time at the public meeting, demonstrates that applicants feel confident in fast tracking applications and bypassing the public all together.?

Both Councillors Annette Groves and Ian Sinclair raised concerns about the process and hastiness in which the application is being moved forward regarding the development on Torbram Road.

On the same agenda as the public meeting during the planning and development committee meeting, the correspondence had a request for an MZO on behalf of Tullamore Industrial GP Limited for the Torbram Road development to Minister Steve Clark?the Minister takes into account Council's support or lack thereof when making the decision.

?I've never seen an MZO request at a public meeting, and I'm just not sure why it's before us at a public information meeting,? said Groves. ?It's a little concerning. I've never seen this where they're so blatant in bringing these MZO's forward. We're at a public information meeting, this is not the appropriate time. At least let it go through somewhat of a process before presenting or having an MZO request?whether it's to us or the Minister?on the agenda.?

Given the fact that staff hadn't been given the chance to voice comments in a report regarding the potential development, Councillor Johanna Downey presented a motion?which was passed?to have the request referred to staff to provide additional information and report back before Council makes a decision on whether to support the MZO or not.

With Town Staff now charged with reporting back, they'll be looking at two elements: the application with the comments from the public meeting in mind and they'll also be commenting on how the request for the rezoning order fits or doesn't fit. There's no clear timeline on when staff will finalize the report.