

Region calling for pause on land-use plans review

By Bill Rea

A lot of work has been done in the Provincial reviews of land-use plans, but there are now calls for a longer consultation process. That was one of the calls coming from Peel Regional council recently.

The Provincial review involves the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.

Arvin Prasad, director of the integrated planning division, told councillors the review is a "very important piece of planning legislation."

He also observed there will be chances for advocacy this month when the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) meets (councillors had asked to be updated by staff before the AMO meeting). He added there will be more chances for consultation, including with representatives of the development industry.

"The issues . . . are complex," he said.

Throughout the process, there have been requests from the Region, and Prasad presented a list of those that have receiving responses.

They included calls to enable inclusionary zoning for affordable housing, supporting agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses, consistency throughout the three Greenbelt plans, control of fill and soil disposal in rural areas, a long-range transportation plan in the Greater Golden Horseshoe area and the need for greater accountability in the plans.

The review includes new targets for density and intensification. Prasad said staff was recommending those targets should apply only to post-2031 development. He said there was no reasonable scenario for meeting those targets, and there were concerns they could impact the housing market and supply mix.

The staff report that went to council stated the province has set the minimum residential intensification target at 60 per cent annually within existing built-up areas. The current target is 40 per cent, and the Region has been planning for that based on the 2006 Growth Plan requirements, which was approved by the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB).

"Municipalities across the Greater Golden Horseshoe have invested considerable time, effort and money, including several lengthy OMB hearings, to ensure conformity with Places to Grow," the staff report stated. "This effort cannot be disregarded by the Province."

In terms of densities in greenfield areas, the staff report stated the Province is proposing to change the targets numbers from 50 residents and jobs per hectare to 80.

Prasad pointed out communities have already been planned at the lower densities.

"You can't unplan what's already in the ground," he said, adding it's not possible to retroactively apply new density numbers.

He also pointed out Provincial investment is needed for things like affordable housing, community hubs, transit and mobility infrastructure, stating infrastructure investment commitments need to be aligned to planned and existing growth.

"They need to be at the table," he said.

In addition, Prasad said the density and intensification targets should include provisions for public health and climate change. He added the Region has done a lot of work in this area, pointing out it's a term of council priority, but the Province has to be involved too.

Staff is also of the opinion that existing municipal integrated growth management strategies must be supported by the Province. Provincial policies in this regard should build on existing municipal efforts, and not reinvent them.

Prasad said the environmental assessment of the GTA West Corridor has to be completed, with a commitment to implement its recommendations. He observed the suspension of the EA last year has resulted in many challenges and delays when it comes to planning.

"Certainty is required," he remarked, pointing out lands along the corridor are essentially frozen, and it's impacting on the Region's ability to protect employment lands.

The Region is also calling for Provincial policy on climate change. Prasad pointed to the need for standards for greenhouse gas inventories, emission reduction strategies, etc. Prasad noted that climate change is a major part of planning. There have been a lot of recent weather events, and plans need to address them.

"The province has listened," he told councillors. "However, more work is needed in specific areas."

Mayor Allan Thompson suggested some of the proposed changes to the plans are premature, and he thought a "pause" would be in order.

"We need to know what the costs are," he said, adding they also need to know what the province's obligations are. He said the 80 residents and jobs per hectare target is knee-jerk. The Mayfield West development is intensified at 65 and 67. "Tell me how we're going to make that work at 80," he said, adding detached homes won't fit into that. He also wondered how stormwater management is to be accommodated with such densities without using everyone's basement as a holding pond. "It doesn't fit in greenfield."

Regional Chair Frank Dale agreed that a pause is needed.

Councillor Jennifer Innis put forth a motion calling a request being made to the Province to extend the comment period. She reasoned if a formal request is made, they will get a formal response.

Brampton Councillor John Sprovieri wondered if the Province is advising people looking for detached homes to travel north for something affordable. He said there are people going as far north as Wasaga Beach, and he wondered if the Province is doing anything to address resulting impacts on the environment or infrastructure.

Prasad said there looks like there's a lot of development going to the north, but it's not that much when compared to what's going on in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. He added it's a concern, because this kind of leapfrogging impacts on the environment and other things.

"Most people want to have their space," Sprovieri observed, adding it's going to be hard to get many of them to settle for the higher densities when they can move north, and that's something the Province needs to address.

Mississauga Councillor Nando Iannicca argued the Region can't wait for the Province to catch up. Both the federal and provincial governments announce policies on things like transportation housing, day care, etc. "I'm waiting for any one of them," he said. He also wondered about the need for more employment lands, asking what the nature of them will be. He also asked about the head office of Pokemon Go.

"That's the new economy," he declared.

Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie said there was a lot of excitement when the plan reviews were announced. But it now seems there are several unanticipated consequences. She said a pause would be a good idea. "Hopefully the Province will listen," she said. But Brampton Councillor Gael Miles didn't think a pause would be of much benefit. She argued the Region should bring forth the good work that has already been done. She said asking for a pause might give the Province the idea that Peel is not ready to respond to change.

"I would rather see us come out strong," she said.

Dale countered that's the reason for seeking the pause. That will give the Region the chance to make sure it's being done right.