

Residents shocked that Brampton and Mississauga trying to control Caledon

The following was submitted by the Belfountain Community Organization.

An Open Letter to Brampton and Mississauga in response to Sam Grewal's article June 12 in the Toronto Star.

In a recent Peel Regional council meeting, reported Grewal, Brampton and Mississauga proposed that Caledon should lose control over its own planning authority. All five Caledon councillors walked out, thereby scuttling the vote and upholding their commitment to their constituents.

Imagine the shock and outrage we residents of Caledon felt to learn that Brampton and Mississauga politicians think they have the right to determine our requirements and needs. Why else would they attempt to over-ride the democratic process by trying to force Caledon to have planning decisions made by the Region's staff and the Ontario development facilitator?

The short-sightedness and outright inaccuracy on the part of certain politicians boggles the mind.

Mississauga Councillor Carolyn Parrish's attack on Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson for selling some of his land to a developer seems hypocritical, since she appears to be pro-development.

But, that aside, let's clarify the misunderstandings about Caledon, starting with the total inaccuracy regarding the Growth Plan.

'Caledon is resisting the growth plan set out by the province,' (Mississauga mayor Bonnie) Crombie said.?

Caledon is not resisting the plan in the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) for Ontario. We are conforming to it. Here's why.

Caledon is 80 per cent Green Belt. It is a primarily rural area that includes part of the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine. The legislation for the Greenbelt and rural areas says that they cannot be developed the way Brampton and Mississauga have been.

The Greenbelt is not intended as a future megacity. In fact, it is in place to benefit all Ontarians ? not just residents of Caledon.

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) created PPS under their Land Use Planning policies. To quote directly from their Greenbelt Protection policy: Protecting nearly 2 million acres of valuable land and water, the Greenbelt supports healthy communities across the Greater Golden Horseshoe by curbing urban sprawl and preserving our agricultural lands and natural heritage. Its woodlands are natural carbon sinks that clean our air and fight climate change. Its wetlands and moraine support our clean water systems. Farms on the Greenbelt supply dairy, pork, beef and poultry products, as well as fresh fruit, vegetables and wines for local and export markets.

'The Greenbelt supports our plans for a prosperous and sustainable Ontario. It is a key part in our government's efforts to protect the environment and fight climate change. Its protection of agricultural lands ensures we can grow our own food for generations to come. The Greenbelt is one of the greatest contributions our generation has made to the future of Ontario.?' Ted McMeekin,

Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Further, the Provincial Policy Statement 2014 says that on rural lands located in municipalities, permitted uses are the management or use of resources; resource-based recreational uses (including recreational dwellings); limited residential development; home occupations and home industries; cemeteries; and other rural land uses.

'Curbing urban sprawl?' in rural areas is one of the Province's stated goals. Not only does Caledon not 'want to become a big urban city,' as Mississauga Councillor George Carlson put it but, because Caledon is 80 per cent Greenbelt, it cannot be an urban center. It's interesting that Caledon's planning policies were labelled in Grewal's article as 'controversial' and 'questionable.' If the Region of Peel would enforce the Greenbelt Plan and the Provincial Policy regarding the Greenbelt, then Caledon would have no more 'planning problems.'

It is the developers who are trying to shrink the Greenbelt, niggling away at Caledon and other areas with their OMB appeals, even though the Greenbelt is supposed to be permanently protected.

Brampton and Mississauga complain about apparently paying for Caledon to go to OMB hearings. The last big OMB hearing about the tiny hamlet of Belfountain in western Caledon was not paid for by any government, but by concerned private citizens to the tune of more than \$100,000.

If developers were not permitted to submit applications that contravene the Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine legislation that covers most of Caledon, these OMB costs would be significantly reduced.

Again, from the MMAH Land Use Greenbelt Protection policy: Taking action to conserve land and resources avoids the need for costly remedial measures to correct problems and supports economic and environmental principles.

Strong communities, a clean and healthy environment and a strong economy are inextricably linked. Long-term prosperity, human and environmental health and social well-being should take precedence over short-term considerations.

This is where we come to the mind-boggling short-sightedness on the part of some Brampton and Mississauga politicians.

The Province insists on curbing urban sprawl in rural areas and conserving the Greenbelt. Why would that be?

Well, do you like to breathe? Or eat?

Do we need trees or farms in Ontario? So what if Caledon and the rest of the Greenbelt get paved over? Canada is a huge country, right? The farmers in some other province can grow our food.

Well, maybe not. The frightening reality is that, despite Canada's gigantic land mass, only 4.7 per cent of it is arable land ? and a good chunk of that is in the Greenbelt. By contrast, the U.S. has 18 per cent, while India's arable land is a whopping 52 per cent.

Canada's tiny 4.7 per cent is rapidly shrinking. Ontario is losing 900 acres of farmland a day.

Once it's gone, we won't be able to grow food on the Canadian Shield. Granite just doesn't work well for growing crops. And, in fact, a gigantic swath of prime farmland across the south end of Caledon is already slated to be paved over for the proposed highway 413.

So the assumption that ? . . . hundreds of thousands of people will likely be settling (in Caledon) as the current collection of rural hamlets is turned into a massive urban centre,? is an extremely dangerous one that would be tantamount to shooting ourselves in the foot. It negates the PPS 2014 and the Greenbelt Protection policy.

The attempt by Brampton and Mississauga to strip ?Caledon of authority over its own planning? has happened while former Toronto mayor David Crombie and his Land Use Committee are collating information about how to shape the future of the Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine.

His committee has not yet had time to digest that information and make recommendations. Are Brampton and Mississauga trying to get in ahead of the Land Use Committee before it can expand the Greenbelt?

Fabricated names for new streets and developments like ?Forest Glen?, ?Valley Field,? or ?Country Meadows? don't change the fact that these areas don't feature a single real forest, field or meadow.

And while it's bad enough that certain Mississauga and Brampton politicians seem to think that the residents of Caledon should have no rights, and falsely accuse Caledon of not conforming to the PPS, equally bad are the astounding misconceptions about Caledon, promoted to no small degree by such articles as the one in Toronto Life (August 2014) called ?Battleground Caledon? in which Caledon was portrayed as a playground for uber-rich weekenders.

Well, guess what? The vast majority of Caledon residents are not uber-rich weekenders who fly in every so often. Only a tiny handful fit into that category.

Most of us live here full-time. This is our home. We are working people and retired people, children and grandparents, middle class and lower income just like anywhere else.

And we aren't the only people who like Caledon. Every year, we host thousands of visitors from the GTA and points around the globe.

Here's something urban politicians don't seem to get: people who live in their cities actually treasure the Greenbelt ? i.e. the countryside. And our visitors don't want to have to drive for three hours to get here. In fact, the majority of Ontarians want the Greenbelt to be expanded.

Building over Caledon means punishing those thousands and thousands of Ontarians who visit the Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine on day trips. They're people who live in Brampton and Mississauga, and other parts of the GTA. They like it here.

When we did a survey last summer, we learned that they especially like the fact that places like Belfountain are relatively unchanged. They don't come here to drive on eight-lane roads or go to shopping malls or buy fast food. They come to see forests and fields, picnic in fresh air, appreciate charming historical buildings, shop and eat in small establishments, and enjoy the hills and valleys of country roads.

What's more, as the fourth largest city on the continent, the GTA is unique in the following respect. It is the only city of its size where citizens can drive for an hour or less and be in real country. In similarly-sized cities, you have to drive for three hours or more to reach the same quality of countryside.

It means that people can enjoy day trips to refresh themselves in nature. Caledon hosts family outings, hiking groups, cycling clubs, motorcycle touring groups and other outdoor enthusiasts. It hardly seems necessary to have to explain the benefits to health, community, spirit, and many other aspects of life that urbanites receive through the unparalleled advantage of accessible, reachable countryside.

Yet, Brampton and Mississauga seem to think that should be taken away from Ontarians and other visitors.

Meanwhile, Caledon's green space is already restricted by quarries and pits that provide millions of tonnes of gravel so cities like Brampton and Mississauga can build concrete structures.

The thing is, countryside is not just a missed opportunity to put down more pavement and build yet another strip mall.

Studies show that nature plays a pivotal role in healing physical and mental health problems as diverse as depression, stress, anxiety, weight, behaviour issues and recovery from gall bladder surgery. Considering the ever-increasing burden of our health care system, purely from a health perspective, building over Caledon and other parts of the Greenbelt would be a disaster.

The megacity concept is an impoverished one that bespeaks a lack of vision and an outdated economic model that recognizes no restrictions: 'Bigger is better.' However, depression is at epidemic levels in North America as people feel lost and alone, despite living with millions of neighbours. Sadly, they lack supportive community which is not something you can grow with new economic development opportunities.

The preferred reality for increasing numbers of people is: 'Small is beautiful.'

Instead of falling back on the bulldoze-and-pave model of development, Caledon and Peel have the opportunity to create something totally new and forward-thinking within the restrictions of the Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine.

We could be world leaders in sustainable, small-scale development that preserves the rural character of the land while offering an unprecedented living opportunity unlike anything available now. Something truly Canadian. An exceptional place to reside or visit that will benefit not just a few politicians and old-school developers but generations of Canadians now and in the future. This is a chance to create a unique legacy.

All it takes is some thinking outside the box, and a determination to recognize the bigger picture that's at stake.

But if we don't step up to the challenge, we will never have this chance again.