

Seniors? community contemplated for Caledon village area

By Bill Rea

It might not be enthusiastic yet, but there is a lot of interest being expressed in the proposal for a seniors' lifestyle community just north of Caledon village.

Heather Glen Seniors Village has shown interest in developing some 200 acres in the area. There has been no formal application made yet, but about 80 people were out last Thursday night for an information session. The meeting was hosted by the Caledon Village Association, and Heather Wilkinson, chair of the association, stressed nothing was officially on the table.

'This really is in its infancy stages,' she observed, commenting it could be a seniors' residential community in the making.

Mayor Marolyn Morrison was pleased to see the attention this proposal was receiving, pointing to the need to accommodate older residents here. She said the Town doesn't want to see them leave.

'There is a great need for this kind of housing in Caledon,' Councillor Richard Paterak observed, adding this could represent 'social capital.'

Paul Mondell, representing the proposal, confirmed there has been no formal submission made. He also commented that as a planner, he tries to get people engaged early in such a development. He also stressed that housing for this growing demographic is becoming a big issue. A presentation has already been made to the Caledon Seniors' Advisory Committee in 2012.

Mondell said he spent about 10 years working in the United States and noticed quite a difference in the way they make provisions to house seniors in their communities; both those who are and are not active. He said he's wondered why a better job of catering to lifestyle needs of people late in life can't be done here. There are many seniors who don't go south for the winter, so he suggested something could be done for them.

Addressing the lands being eyed, Mondell said they take up a 200-acre farm that had been slated for development on what is now the Provincial Greenbelt. He agreed there are points on the property that are environmentally sensitive, as he argued the boundaries that the Province applied to the Greenbelt were somewhat arbitrary.

Mondell also said he has discussed this with Town councillors and has received a soft endorsement of the idea. The attitude so far, he said, is more thought is needed on this.

Blair Gagnon, financial consultant with Heather Glen Village, said it's a federally-incorporated, not-for-profit organization with a board of directors from Rotary clubs in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). He said that Rotary, representing the grass roots in the community, has a vested interest in the needs. He added they know their membership is aging, and that has to be addressed.

The aim, he said, is to establish an on-going, aging-in-place community. that includes addressing a number of issues, such as health, wellness, education, security, lifestyle before it can be determined what such a community will look like.

Gagnon pointed out there are small pockets of seniors' housing which really don't provide for the opportunity to solve these issues. These projects need to be larger in order to bring in the needed social infrastructure.

Gagnon commented that by 2015, there will be 1.6 million people in Ontario older than 55, and about 341,000 of them will live in Peel Region.

The current proposal calls for a compact urban community, consisting of about 2,000 dwellings to accommodate about 3,000 people. This community needs to be walkable, Gagnon said, so the residents can interact. They are also looking a mix of housing types, including singles, semis, row houses and low-rise apartments. One point he made is it will allow people to downsize, yet stay in the community, as their circumstances change over time.

The property, which stretches between Highway 10 and Kennedy Road, would be developed in stages over several years, Gagnon said. There will be various residential densities and plenty of green space.

Mondell added the environmental component of the development is important.

'It's not in the middle of nowhere,' he added, pointing out hospitals in both Orangeville and Brampton will be accessible.

'It's compact,' he said. 'It's walkable, it's livable, it integrates with the environment.'

Gagnon added it will be within an hour from the centre of Toronto, and close to major highways, meaning it will be easy for family and children to visit. He said one of the most common problems with planning seniors' housing is the travel time for family, so finding a location in the GTA is important.

Heather Glen will be the sole owner of the property, Gagnon said, adding that will ensure the use carries on in perpetuity. It will be a life-lease community, with the owners taking care of all services and facilities.

He added it will have a positive impact on the municipality, commenting the infrastructure will be inclusive to the area.

'We want to be your partners in this community,' he told the meeting.

He also observed that the larger the project, the more amenities that can be added, because there will be more people to use them. Among the amenities currently on the table is a village centre core, complete with medical services, as well as recreation and educational facilities. It would serve as hub, with various activities like theatre, swimming, a library, curling, bowling, etc. Gagnon added they would be open to the public.

He also said the community would employ about 500 people at full build-out.

As well, he said the time frame for the phasing of the development would depend on the market.

Gagnon said the next step would be to take the feedback that's been gathered and work with stakeholders to come up with a community plan.

Mondell added the key to success here will be the people who look at the project because they're convinced it's real.

"We have a lot of heavy lifting to do," he said.

Gagnon told one man at the meeting there will internal roads, with parking, as well as golf carts and scooters.

"It will be a car-friendly environment," he said.

There will be a variety of unit sizes available, but Gagnon said it's too early to comment on what the rates would be. He did say they would be affordable to much of the population. He pointed out it's hard to sell a life-lease project if it's not priced at a level the market can handle. He added banks won't provide funding if they don't see the economics working.

Paterak pointed out that since the lands are on the Greenbelt, that part shouldn't be as expensive.

Mondell said they are hoping to approach the Province with the idea that development like this should be considered in such an area of the Greenbelt.

There were a number of people intrigued by the idea, but there was concern it could become too popular, with people flocking from the cities to the south and taking all the units. Gagnon countered that aging people are likely to want to stay in areas with which they are familiar.

There were people at the meeting wondering why put it on the Greenbelt.

Mondell commented a lot of the Greenbelt lands are environmentally sensitive, but these ones aren't, repeating they were slated for development.

He also didn't think the southern edge of Caledon is the place for something like this. Developments there would be more suitable for young families.

Mondell also said this will be high-amenity, low-density housing," he added.

One man at the meeting thought this was a great idea and was appreciative that it was being brought forward. But he was also concerned that the land is on the Greenbelt. If this development were to go through, he was concerned that would set a precedent.

He also pointed out they are looking at a wind-swept area. "Do you really want to build up here in that environment?" he asked.

"This is a wonderful idea," Wilkinson declared. "Absolutely needed."

She added something like this could give Caledon an identity as a place where people go to retire.

She also took a show-of-hands vote that revealed most people in the room liked the concept, and maybe a little more than half liked the proposed location.

There were also concerns about how it could be guaranteed that only seniors would be living there.

Gagnon said the target market will be those 55 and older, adding the amenities would be designed for that age group.

"You can't discriminate," Mondell said, but added the amenities won't be attractive to young families.

One woman said that wouldn't have attracted her when she was younger.

"There's no bloody way I would have been caught dead there," she declared.