

Speaker urges new ways of thinking on community planning

By Bill Rea

There's going to have to be a different way of thinking over the coming years if Caledon is going to develop the way people here want it.

That was the message delivered recently by former London (Ontario) City councillor Gord Hume as he spoke at the Business Breakfast, hosted by Mayor Marolyn Morrison.

Hume has written five books of building strong and creative cities.

He reminded everyone that there's going to be significant growth in Caledon over the coming years, and he cited a few ideas for planners, politicians and taxpayers to keep in mind to deal with it. The coming growth, he said, offers an 'unusual opportunity' for discussion on what kind of community people want Caledon to become as a result.

That the growth is coming has been determined by the Province.

'That's pretty much a done deal,' he observed, adding Queen's Park will be addressing matters such as transit, the future of the 'White Belt' (land intended for development) and the protection of natural assets.

The equestrian history of the area is well-known, Hume said, as is Caledon's reputation as a safe and family-oriented community.

'You are the greatest town in Ontario,' Hume told the audience, adding that was more than just the work of politicians and officials, but also of the residents.

'What is going to change is your thinking,' he added.

Hume acknowledged that about 80 per cent of the land in Caledon is not going to develop, owing to the presence of the Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment, etc. But that other 20 per cent will see the creation of new urban areas. There will be a lot of steps that need to be followed, and keeping local control will be part of that. Hume said that will require public engagement.

He stressed the importance of the public being involved.

'At the end of the day, this is your community,' he remarked. 'Will Caledon dare to be different?'

There will be choices to be made, and he said one of the first issues to be addressed will be if the community is to be built for people or cars.

Hume cited the example of Auckland, New Zealand, which he said is currently in transition. He commented that the City basically sold out to cars some years ago, adding one of the planners there had told him, 'The people fell out of love with the city.'

In response, officials in Auckland have come up with a 25-to-30-year plan to improve things. It's slated to cost about \$9 billion, but Hume said it will enable the city to compete in Asian markets. He said they haven't yet figured out how to pay for it all, but he added the vision and approach is remarkable.

The Auckland people started to rethink their downtown, with curved and narrow streets. That caused traffic to slow down and led to better connection with shops and neighbours.

'It's engaging the community,' he said, adding parking is behind the shops and pedestrians have the right of way.

Hume also talked about Melbourne, Australia, which he said is the most beautiful city in the world. He added it's what Toronto could have been.

He said that city features widened sidewalks, and thousands of trees are planted every year. There's also a lot of encouragement for people to use public transit, and he said about half of all the trips downtown are by foot.

He also said there's a very efficient tram system there.

The new streets in Melbourne include the tram lines, a couple of lanes for traffic, a row of trees, bike lanes, more trees and sidewalks. Hume said it all adds up to a 'very effective street plan.'

Hume pointed out developers are going to be very interested in Caledon in the years to come.

'The community's going to change,' he said. 'That's a given.'

The question is going to be where and when the new urban core for Caledon goes, and he said this is the time to influence that development.

He also said the new urban designs can be learned from what's been done in other cities.

One thing he advised is the cost of housing is going to reduce the amount of individual living space in urban areas. Hume said bright, young people are not going to want to spend all their time in condos. They're going to want to be out in the open in the community.

'The public realm becomes the new community living room,' he said.

He also said that great cities don't regulate public places to death. But they are also places where walking is encouraged.

Hume cited the example of New York City, where automobiles were banned from Times Square. At first there were fears that would be the end of things. But people started to walk and talk and meet and greet there. Hume said it's become a very successful public place.

He did point out that more cars will be coming, so there will have to be planning as to where to put them.

Hume also pointed to the benefits of having public art on display in urban areas.

"We don't invest enough in public art, as a nation or as a community," he said. "We can do better."

Hume stressed the importance of attracting entrepreneurs and young families. He also said a number of successful cities are encouraging shops and restaurants at street level, with commercial operations upstairs.

"Will you roll out the red carpet for developers, or the red tape?" he asked, urging municipal officials not to make the mistake of regulating every little step. "Planning regulations don't make sense if they're not creating great cities."

He said more should be demanded at the start from developers. If clear standards are set out at the beginning, there will be more buy-in from them.

Hume also said the public sector has a role to play, and it has to be prepared to invest in innovation.

"Public process doesn't have to be boring or dull," he said.



Mayor Marolyn Morrison welcomed Gord Hume to her Business Breakfast recently.