

Town looking at opportunities along GTA West Corridor

By Bill Rea

The status of farmland is on the minds of many as plans proceed for the GTA West Corridor which runs through Caledon.

Town councillors recently received an update on the land use study being conducted for the corridor and surrounding lands by Nick McDonald of Meridian Planning.

The corridor runs for about 50 kilometres, west from Highway 400, through Caledon, then south through Halton Region to the area of the interchange between Highway 401 and 407. The plan is it will eventually contain a 400-series highway, along with other transportation provisions.

McDonald said the Province has come up with a short list of possible routes for the highway, and that will have significant impacts on where Caledon's development goes in the future. He added that opens up opportunities, and the Town has to decide how it's going to take advantage of them.

The study McDonald's firm is conducting is aimed at facilitating discussion of the impacts and opportunities, which will enable the Town to comment on the Province's plans and respond to them.

McDonald told councillors to expect a 25-kilometre highway to have a right-of-way of up to 170 metres. A six-lane divided highway will cost almost \$500 million, not including interchanges. There will be six to eight of those in Caledon, costing about \$25 million each. There would be additional costs for things like bridges, other road improvements, land acquisition, drainage improvements, etc.

Only about 15 per cent of the land in Caledon is available for urban development (the rest is subject to the Niagara Escarpment Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Greenbelt Plan). That works out to about 105 square kilometres. Assuming 50 persons and jobs per hectare, McDonald said straight math indicates another 525,000 people and jobs in the area.

He added that doesn't necessarily mean there will be such high population growth, also pointing out those figures could change. The three Provincial land use plans are up for review. He also didn't think the Greenbelt is likely to shrink as a result.

McDonald cited a number of examples of substantial urban growth in areas since 1970, including the densely populated lands, such as the area of Vaughan Mills and Canada's Wonderland, which are on what used to be a 'sleepy country road.'

There were other examples where growth has followed the path of highways, such as Highways 7 and 27 in Vaughan, in Markham along highway 407 and the employment growth around Highway 401 and Mississauga Road.

McDonald stressed there is a lot to think about, adding timing is critical. He also said highways are always front and centre when it comes to such decision making.

Issues to be considered include the Greenbelt boundaries, which could change as a result of the review.

'It should certainly be an interesting ride over the next couple of years,' McDonald observed. 'It takes a long time to plan for growth. It's not a simple process.'

Other factors include the location of prime agricultural land, which McDonald said takes up most of the study area. They will also have to consider existing and permanent land uses, such as cemeteries, the need to provide access for the transport of aggregates from pits along highways so they can avoid communities, the changes to driving patterns from the new highway, the current location of major employment areas (South Albion, Tullamore, Mayfield West), the nature of existing and future employment areas (should they be clustered?), and the need to plan for a complete and healthy community.

Councillor Annette Groves commented on the need to have proper mapping.

She also commented facilities like warehouses take up a lot of room, but don't provide much assessment or employment. She said consideration has to be given to where they go where they can have the least impact on residents.

Groves also pointed out a highway is an economic corridor, and people shouldn't be housed next to one, as the road would impact on their health and quality of life.

Councillor Nick deBoer observed that the Greenbelt, when it was first designated, was to protect farmland, but it's resulted in growth to the north. He commented the Town's been dealt a card hand and is trying to do something with it.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli pointed to the need to give more consideration to agriculture, adding that's what people want in the community.

He also said big changes face Caledon and there needs to be a comprehensive visioning exercise involving consultation with the community.

As well, Mezzapelli argued that if the highway goes in, it should be kept close to the urban boundary.

He also observed that undeveloped land mitigates climate change, and that should be taken into account.

Mezzapelli observed no money has been set aside for the highway, and he was reluctant to set aside lands for employment until they know the where the road's going.

The Province is lacking foresight, Councillor Barb Shaughnessy charged, pointing there's been no consideration given to putting a hydro line in the corridor, and that should have been basic. She also said the government has been 'gutless' for not moving on getting Highway 427 extended to the north.