

Variety of issues discussed at Whitebelt meeting

By Bill Rea

There appears to be a certain amount of agreement among residents who are considering what the Whitebelt in Caledon should look like.

About 100 were on hand for a recent public session on the issue.

Kathie Kurtz, senior policy planner with the Town, said the purpose of the meeting was to get opinions as part of the Whitebelt Visioning Exercise.

One complicating factor is the future of the GTA West Transportation Corridor that traverses the southern part of Caledon, including the Whitebelt. Kurtz pointed out the Ministry of Transportation had been in the middle of an environmental assessment on the corridor, but that work was suspended in December. The government, through an Order in Council in April, announced the establishment of an advisory committee to assist with the review of the corridor.

"We don't know who's on that committee," she said.

Kurtz added they are planning around the corridor because it's not been taken off the table.

She also mentioned that the province has released proposed changes to the various land use plans. Changes being considered for the Growth Plan could have implications for the type and timing of development in the Whitebelt.

Nick McDonald of Meridian Planning said this visioning exercise is unprecedented in the Toronto area.

"We are really planning for the longer term," he said, adding its among the building blocks in making Caledon a complete community.

He explained the Whitebelt takes up about 15 per cent of the land in Caledon, or about 105 square kilometres. It's the land that is not covered by the Niagara Escarpment Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Greenbelt Plan. The Whitebelt is land that is available for urban development.

McDonald said the Town started a GTA West land use study in 2014, but expanded it in November 2015 to provide a framework for long-term planning and development in the Whitebelt and to address the interrelationship of new land uses with existing and planned communities, infrastructure, farms, natural heritage systems, etc. The aim, he said, is to come up with the long-term plan that will identify major natural and cultural heritage features that need to be protected, as well as major concentrations of farming activity that should be protected too. The plan would also identify strategic employment lands for long-term protection, as well as regional and local transportation corridors. It would also identify the location of major residential and community use areas.

McDonald said a vision establishes the ideal future for the community. He added the vision should be understood and shared by those in the community, be broad enough to take in a variety of perspectives, be inspiring and uplifting to those involved with its development, and easy to communicate.

"This is no small effort that the Town is undertaking," McDonald said, pointing out the Whitebelt could eventually contain some 525,000 people and jobs. As a comparison, he said Brampton, with more than 266 square kilometres has a current population of about 550,000, and that's expected to increase to 837,000 by 2031.

The meeting included a series of questions. Most people at the session were given portable clickers on which they could respond.

McDonald was pleased to see there was general agreement that planning for the buildout of the Whitebelt should consider all aspects.

"That's good to know going forward," he remarked.

he also found lots of agreement that planning further ahead allows the Town to be more creative and aspirational, and not restricted to current thinking and issues.

When it came to defining elements in the Whitebelt, there was no one that stood out in terms of priority. There were 24 of the roughly 100 responders who said agriculture should get top priority, followed by environmental areas, the separation of existing communities from each other, rural roads and making sure Caledon doesn't look like Brampton or Vaughan.

In addressing what could be done better in existing urban areas, 26 responders said it should be easier to travel from home to work, while 23 said employment areas should be closer to residential areas. There were 16 who said retail areas are too far from many residential areas, and another 16 who stated it takes too long for services to be provided after the housing has been built. There were also 14 who said many new development areas look the same, and 13 said there aren't many interesting places to walk in.

In terms of success indicators, 35 people said there should be a range of housing options for all ages and incomes, 23 said there should be multiple options for travelling from one place to another, 25 said the services required for new development should be built at the same time.

In dealing with agriculture, there were 33 respondents who said some land in the Whitebelt should be permanently reserved for agricultural uses, while 62 said there shouldn't.

?People have definite opinions on this point,? McDonald observed.

There was significant agreement expressed that development areas should be fully built out before development in subsequent areas proceed. There was also a lot of support for the idea that new employment areas should be identified before new residential areas.

In addressing community structure, McDonald had put forth a number of possible options, with most support going to a Bolton and Mayfield West focus. There were 29 people in support of that, compared to 28 who opted for Mayfield West, 26 for Bolton and 11 who picked Tullamore.

There were suggestions that with all the issues currently facing Caledon, it would be prudent to hold off on the visioning exercise until some of them have been dealt with. one woman mentioned the GTA?West Corridor.

McDonald couldn't say when the Province is going to make a decision on that, but he stressed the importance of getting people talking about it.

There were also calls to have a separate meeting just for residents, and not developers.