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Planning questions went unanswered at conference, says Mayor

By Brock Weir

Last week's Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference brought lawmakers from the Provincial and Municipal levels together to brainstorm ideas, share success stories, and press the Province on local issues, and Aurora came away from the table with some wins and losses, according to Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Going into last week's meeting, which was held in Ottawa, Mayor and Council had a number of items on their to-do list, including advocating for municipalities to have a greater day in local planning decisions and improving access to Highway 404.

Tackling the first issue, Mayor Mrakas says he was interested to hear from Premier Doug Ford that the Province should ?get out of the way of municipalities? and allow them to govern themselves. This, says Mayor Mrakas, was a positive and welcome message, but one that has not translated to policy.

?It's great he feels that way, but I don't think we've seen that yet,? Mayor Mrakas tells The Auroran.

This can be seen primarily in the Progressive Conservative government's passage of Bill 108, which rolls back changes made by the previous Liberal Government to nix the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) in favour of a Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT). Bill 108, passed earlier this year, retains LPAT but restores to it many of the powers previously held by the OMB that were of primary concern to local municipalities.

?If they truly mean that (about getting out of the way of municipalities) and they are moving in a different direction where they are going to get out of our way and let us govern, that's great to hear, but I haven't seen it,? says Mayor Mrakas. ?They shouldn't get out of the way, but they should sit down and work with us; that means having proper consultations, meetings, sitting down with us and hearing what is happening at the grassroots level. That's a better approach than just to say, ?We're going to get out of your way.' It's about working together and I think everyone understands that we need to do that.

?The problem with hearing the Premier saying that, it is funny because Bill 108 basically stripped municipalities of the authority of deciding how we grow our communities. The question was asked (of Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing), ?You're going to go back to a flawed system, one that strips the authority from municipal Councils. Why are you doing that?' It is unfortunate that the answer wasn't really there and the answer the Minister gave was, ?Well, judge me in a year's time. Come back and see how it works and judge me in a year's time.' He didn't really give us a

full answer on why he wanted to go back to the flawed system and why he thought that was the right thing to do.

?I can guarantee? a lot of the OMB Reform Working Group are going to come back here in a year's time and judge him. I think the residents of our community, York Region, the GTA and right across the Province are going to judge him as well. When it comes to planning in our communities, we're all about making sure there is not over-development in our communities.?

Members of Aurora Council were also left without firm answers when it comes to Highway 404 and Aurora's long-sought interchange with the 404 at St. John's Sideroad. Mayor Mrakas says he was hoping to get a chance to sit down with Caroline Mulroney, Minister of Transportation, at the Conference but, as that didn't happen, he is hoping to line up a meeting in the near future.

?I want to [stress] the importance of having that interchange at St. John's and Highway 404 and the need to have that to relieve some of the traffic situations we're going to be dealing with as Newmarket and Aurora continue to grow, and even north from us continues to grow,? he says. ?It is something that was very big on our plates to get out there and let the Province know it is something that they need to move forward with. They have moved forward with the subway coming up north, but there are other things they need to look at from a traffic perspective to make sure that all areas in the north don't get forgotten and they just deal with the southern part of York Region.?

Yet, there were some concrete positives to come out of the Conference. One such positive that will impact Aurora, says Mayor Mrakas, is the Province's commitment to open up funding for cultural and recreational initiatives in concert with Federal programs to cover new cultural and recreational builds, such as Library Square.

?This is important to us, from an Aurora perspective, because it has to do with the funding that we're looking for for Library Square,? says Mayor Mrakas. ?That's an exciting announcement to hear the Provincial Government is going to open up and allow for those applications to start coming in. That was part of the holdup with the Federal part of the funding we're looking to get for Library Square. We were all concerned it wasn't going to be opened up until after the Federal election, but they decided to do that September 3, so staff are already prepared to put in the application on the Provincial side and our application is already in on the Federal side.?

The Town is hoping to secure $14 million in funding, split evenly between the Federal and Provincial levels of government, to help make the Library Square project a reality.