

Affordable housing, walkable communities rise to the top in first round of OP review

Providing affordable housing and moving away from tailoring communities to cars were among the issues rising to the top in the first round of public consultation on Aurora's new Official Plan.

The revised Official Plan (OP), a blueprint intended to guide growth in Aurora through 2041, was formally presented to local lawmakers at last week's Public Planning meeting.

Last updated in 2010, the OP has been the subject of several amendments in the ensuing ten years, and a new OP will bring the Town into conformity with a number of pieces of legislation that have been updated since that time, including the Province's Official Growth Plan and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.

Twelve principles have been pinned down to help guide Aurora's Official Plan review. They include: Promoting responsible growth management; ensuring design excellence; building a greener community; providing a range and mix of housing; providing appropriate community facilities; protecting stable neighbourhoods; developing vibrant new neighbourhoods; advancing the economy; building a successful downtown; establishing a linked greenlands system; conserving cultural heritage resources; and providing sustainable infrastructure.

While only one resident came forward Tuesday night to offer his opinion, his input touched upon many of these principles.

"This Town is sprawling and 60 years of development have led to this sprawl, but it has created and we continually reinforce a car-centric planning style, which, if you listen to anything going on in the world, even outside York Region, this should be something we're discouraging," said resident Neil Asselin. "I live on the Yonge Street corridor, I can walk to the GO Station, yet getting anywhere on my bicycle is not safe, first of all, not pleasant. Getting around as a pedestrian in the summer, there are bicycles on the sidewalk and I don't blame them because they don't feel safe, but it makes the pedestrian experience not safe. I can walk five minutes to the grocery store, but that walk is so unpleasant along Yonge Street because there are no buffers from the sidewalk to the lanes.

"The lanes are too wide, people are speeding, there are no trees. It is just parking lots and drive-thrus, and we continually go along this path of reinforcing this need for a car, even though we have things on our doorstep, but we should also be building around Town and centring a lot around localized micro-economy. Bayview is very unfriendly and a lot of our retail is located on Bayview. I can cycle here in ten minutes, but in order to do it safely, it takes me 20 minutes."

Also contributing to sprawl, he said, was the proliferation of single-family dwellings, which leaves many people out of the equation ? particularly those looking to

Secondary suites, which often take the form of basement apartments are ?fine? but not ideal, he contended.

?There's no shame in renting and there's no shame in having our neighbourhoods accommodate renters, and just building along a promenade plan, we're not really promoting a mixed-use, vibrant neighbourhood,? said Mr. Asselin. ?Home ownership is unaffordable but that doesn't mean everybody has to own a house and have a mortgage.

?We need to open our eyes and open our minds and open some books and understand what good policy is, not what's popular, because sometimes it isn't going to be popular and there are a lot of things that have proven to be good policy even though they weren't popular and didn't fit into a four year election cycle. Some things are better taken slowly and taken cautiously and really get at the root of the humanity in our Town and what is most important.?

Responding to the residents' points, Town Planner David Waters said Aurora is ?essentially? out of greenfield development lands for residential use, so future growth will likely take the form of higher densities to meet targets set out by the Region of York's OP and provincial targets.

Councillor John Gallo said he also shared the resident's concerns, calling for a more detailed look at the Town's Trails Master Plan to improve on its intended use to allow people to get to and from work, to stores, and to recreation centres off-road ? safely.

?The whole purpose is a utilitarian off-road plan,? he said. ?That's how [trails advocate Klaus Wehrenberg] designed it, so people can get from their home, to work, to shop, through our trails system. That is the whole point of the plan and I think we should augment that.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner also said she agreed with many of the points raised, placing special emphasis on affordable housing.

?We need to think about low incomes and moderate incomes,? she said. ?Habitat for Humanity has teachers on their list of people who can have a Habitat for Humanity house and that means we're really in trouble.?

Replied Mr. Waters: ?It is [a matter of] finding the appropriate locations [to support] that kind of density housing. That typically will be the lands surrounding the Aurora GO Station. There will also be opportunities along the Yonge Street Corridor within the Promenade Plan for higher density housing, both condominium and also rental to be developed over time and that is where the bulk of our growth is going to occur over the next 20-some years.?

By Brock Weir