

Aurora and Region need to work together to tackle housing crunch: Councillors

By Brock Weir

Aurora should have more of a say when it comes to addressing the need for affordable housing in the community.

That is the word coming from Councillors out of last week's Council meeting. The calls came amid discussions related to a proposed plan for a new small-scale subdivision off St. John's Sideroad, just east of Mavrinac Boulevard. As proposed by the company Edenbrook, the land of question is nearly four hectares in area for up to 42 residential units.

Discussions were also compounded from issues stemming from the June meeting of York Regional Council, where members signed off on their 10-Year Housing Plan dubbed 'A Place for Everyone', which addresses the issues of affordable housing, making positive inroads in tackling homelessness, and increasing affordable rental housing throughout the Region, in addition to further support for local homeless.

In discussing the new development, Councillor Wendy Gaertner questioned if any of these objectives, as well as affordable housing targets in Aurora's own Official Plan, would be addressed in the area.

Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, however, told Council that that is 'always' a difficult question to answer as opportunities are often in flux.

'What this plan is proposing is approximately 42 detached lots with frontages ranging from 45 to 50 feet, but there is a block in the northeast quadrant block which will be the subject of a future application,' he explained. 'It is a future development block that will most likely be a more intense urban development, likely on a private road, so that would accommodate more affordable housing opportunities.'

'Town-wide, we do have affordable housing options within our Downtown and other areas where we have some apartment building formats and Townhouse development formats where we closely meet that affordable housing criteria.'

That answer did not quite hit the mark for some Councillors. Councillor Gaertner continued her line of questioning, asking whether Aurora was 'obligated' to follow the Regional push for increasing further rental units, but Mr. Ramunno said there is a certain threshold in meeting that mark.

'There is a threshold based on the latest information from the Region with respect to what affordability means within the Town of Aurora,' he said. 'If someone were to buy a new home, that threshold is about \$420,000. The rental threshold is approximately \$1,000. We do have opportunities within the Town, we do have new housing and resale housing that would fit that threshold. We do have rental stock within the Town that would accommodate those affordable housing opportunities.'

Those thresholds, however, did not quite wash with Councillor Evelyn Buck, who suggested they were thresholds that were far too high for the average family or individual in need of these affordable housing opportunities.

'They are not affordable for anyone that is underneath the income level of \$75,000 at least,' said Councillor Buck. 'It sounds like we are concerned, but we're not doing anything. There is only one way to make affordable housing available in the Region of York and that is to work in cooperation with the Region. The only social housing in the Region that is being built is in a partnership between any municipality and the Region. The way it happens is a [municipality provides] a site to the Region and the Region is responsible for social housing.'

'It is happening in Newmarket. They have no problem with providing social housing. We have sites in Aurora we could provide to the Region. We have done an inventory of sites in Aurora that hasn't seen the light of day in 10 years.'

One particular site she said she had in mind was a lot on Mary Street, near that street's entrance to Sheppard's Bush Conservation Area.

Responding to these concerns later in the meeting, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, who serves as Aurora's representative at Regional Council, said there would need to be direction from Aurora Council to follow through and give advice on affordable housing initiatives coming down from the Region.

“They are draft guidelines,” said Mayor Dawe of the 10 year plan. “[The Region is] off to consultation with the nine stakeholder municipalities with the final plan to come back in 2015, so at this point the Region is essentially coming down to the municipalities looking for comments. I will commit to working with Mr. Ramunno for the best way to get Council involved in this particular process.”