

Council issues call to action on OMB reform

By Brock Weir

The adage of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' does not apply when it comes to Aurora Council's relationship with the Ontario Municipal Board following a motion last week calling for the province to overhaul the system.

Council unanimously approved a motion brought forward by Councillor Tom Mrakas calling on the Province to limit the reach of the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) when it comes to local planning decisions.

The motion calls on the Province to limit the jurisdiction of the OMB only to questions of law and process, and to bolster the planning decisions made by municipal councils unless they fall afoul of existing legislation.

While the move is likely to have no impact on current cases between the Town and developers before the OMB, including the redevelopment of Highland Gate, Council largely agreed the time for change is here.

'When we look at applications that come before us at our planning meetings, the Town and municipalities have all the responsibility and we bear all costs,' said Councillor Tom Mrakas. 'Yet, in my opinion, we have no authority at the end of the day. We need to take steps to put forward this motion to let our feelings be known, as a municipality, that the way appeals are put forward are just not right. When we stand together, we do so from a position of strength and we let the Province know we expect change, we expect reform and I think by standing together we get that.'

Since he put forward his motion last month, the Councillor said he has heard concerns that OMB reform could lead to Councils making decisions based on NIMBY-ism (Not In My Back Yard), something he dismissed. Upholding Official Plans, he said, is what local lawmakers are mandated to do.

The motion was supported by Councillor John Abel, who brought forward a similar motion last year.

The OMB, he said, 'is almost redundant' and has 'eroded' Aurora's existing Official Plan wholesale.

'It is time for revision,' said Councillor Abel. 'The Provincial Government knows it. We have to make everyone aware there is a unifying voice from the [Association of Municipalities of Ontario] all the way through.'

Added Councillor Jeff Thom: 'The system in Ontario is broken and it needs to be fixed. Ontario is the only province with the setup we have.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said there was, once upon a time, a justification for the OMB but 'those days are long gone.'

'Municipalities are strong now, we're educated, we know what we want for our communities and we should be in charge of dictating their planning,' she said.

For Councillor Harold Kim, pressing the Province to overhaul the OMB was something of a 'David and Goliath' case. While he said we all know what happened to Goliath, he said he hoped Aurora's motion would have a 'snowball effect' with other municipalities to affect real change.

'Hopefully we will get some benefits and future municipalities will benefit as well,' he said.

The more voices the better was something Councillor Sandra Humfries advocated for, voting in favour of the motion while also pressing for Mayor Geoff Dawe, Aurora's representative around the Regional Council table, to take this motion to the Region and

have it put on the floor for Regional endorsement as well.

?It is very critical,? she said. ?We are continuously trying to make a significant change and [have] impact to this very serious change that is required with communities being impacted now. It really should be in our control what happens to our Town and our residents. I think it allows for a lot of further support from all Ontario Municipalities and that begins at the Region.?

While Mayor Dawe said he would check on the proper procedures to bring this to the Regional Council Table, Councillor Humfryes said she hopes there is action by the next Regional Council meeting on February 18.