

Council members question how Wellington lands were re-designated at Region

Plans for a 519-unit apartment building on Wellington Street East near Leslie were rejected last week as Council members questioned how the lands were re-designated from employment to residential use by the Region.

At issue at last Tuesday's Public Planning meeting was a proposed seven-storey building for the intersection's southwest corner.

A report before Council by Rosanna Punit, Planner for the Town of Aurora, said the lands were listed under a Business Park Designation but as the Region moves forward with its Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR), the lands are not intended to be maintained for employment use.

In an email shared with media by Councillor John Gallo, it was claimed the conversion of these lands from employment to residential use had already taken place following a letter written to the Region last year by the Town's former planning director David Waters.

It would have been an enormous series of incompetence for other staff at the Region to not know the application for this site, to be converted from employment lands, was removed, Councillor Gallo wrote, stating this move went against Council direction. You took the word of the Director of Planning for the Town of Aurora, which was contrary to all reports and direction of Council and made the changes outside the MCR process.

Councillor Gallo continued to voice his concerns at that evening's Public Planning Meeting, as did local environmental advocate George Skoulikas who said he was very surprised to read the lands in question were not intended to be maintained as employment lands through this Regional update.

The words 'under review' suggest it is still in process when York Region long-range planning staff have already recently confirmed [the process] was finalized last year and no further adjustments are contemplated, said the resident.

This is an absolute non-starter, said Councillor Gallo. A letter from (Waters) dated October 13, 2020 requested the change to the mapping of 1298 Wellington Street East [to] remove it from Regionally-significant employment lands was enough for York Region to change the mapping.

I can't believe sitting here today that that process was followed properly. Certainly no direction from Council and definitely reports to Council indicating otherwise no one member of staff should have that type of power to convert ten acres of employment lands into non-employment lands. It should not happen and that is exactly what happens. We should not be putting this to a public planning meeting until they deal with the employment land conversion. I will not be voting for this.

Added Councillor Wendy Gaertner: This must be denied tonight. We need to have it in writing from Regional staff about the MCR and what is happening with this land in the process. Regional staff seems to be contradicting municipal staff. We need to clear that up before we make any decision on what is to be done.

Council ultimately rejected the application on several grounds, including encroachments on environmental features, inappropriate density, impacts on species of concern, as well as the removal of a short supply of employment lands and significant issues with land conversion and the MCR process.

While the applicant can appeal Council's decision to the Ontario Land Tribunal (OLT), Marco Ramunno, Aurora's present Director of Planning, reiterated the MCR is ongoing.

It is up to local Council to consider, moving forward, whether [to change] the land use, he said. We'll have our first draft released to Council and the public for ongoing consultation for final consideration before June of 2023 and that is where we identify as well

our new planning horizon to the year 2051.

These lands are no longer identified as employment in the Regional plan. Planning staff here at the Town of Aurora, back in 2018, a number of reports identified those various requests to convert employment lands to other community-type plans, various reports to Council back in late 2019. I will stress the Regional Official Plan shows these lands as community lands and they have been removed from the employment lands under the land use designation.

In response to the Public Planning meeting, York's Chief Planner Paul Freeman said that in addition to employment conversion requests received by their landowners and their agents, the MCR process involved refining employment area boundaries in consultation with local municipalities.

Identification of the south-west corner of Wellington and Leslie Streets in the Town of Aurora was deemed as Community Area on Map 1A of the Draft Regional Official Plan endorsed by York Regional Council in November 2021 for consultation, he said in a statement. This was in response to a request from senior Town staff, as noted.

Given previous employment conversions in the area, west of Leslie Street, York Region did not deem the subject parcel Regionally significant employment land and will therefore not be mapped as Regional Employment Land in the Regional Official Plan. Uses for this parcel of land at the southwest corner of Wellington Street and Leslie Street will be determined by the Town of Aurora, including employment land should they deem it as such.

The updated Regional Official Plan will be proposed to Regional Council for adoption next Thursday, June 30, and will be subject to further approval from Ontario's Ministry of Municipal Affairs and housing, as well as municipal partners for conformity as local municipal official plans are updated.

By Brock WeirEditor**Local Journalism Initiative Reporter**