

GETTING THINGS DONE: A Rebuttal

By Mayor Tom Mrakas

I read a recent op-ed piece in a national newspaper about the need for more housing in Ontario and what's holding it back.

Included in the piece were the stated perspectives of a few representatives of the building industry. Suffice to say I was disappointed in what I read; statements such as "nothing can get built" because "developments are held up in 10 years of red tape."

The thrust of the piece seemed to be saying, to me at least, that there is a housing "supply" issue in Ontario, the fault of which lay at the feet of Municipal governments, and our misguided belief that we need to uphold our Official Plans. If only Municipal governments would just get on board, cut all the "red tape" of planning policies, rip up our various municipal zoning bylaws and replace it all with anything-goes development, then the housing "supply" problem would be solved.

As I prefer to deal with facts, rather than self-serving half truths, let's consider the statement that "nothing can get built" due to "10 years of red tape."

Not true. By any measure. Any resident in York Region can tell you that things are getting built. In fact, I have an inbox full of residents expressing concern about how much is getting built and the increasing encroachment of development and corresponding loss of greenspace.

But leaving that aside, as per the Region's own staff report, "(York) Region has an adequate supply of both registered and draft approved and designated units to support anticipated demand." In fact, right now the Region has a designated supply of over 180,000 units. That supply, "includes units within planning applications that are proposed as well as potential development and re-development of lands with a residential designation in local municipal plans but which currently have no application."

No "red tape" needs to be cut. Start digging now. Just follow the Official Plan in the municipality you wish to build and you can build tomorrow.

If the issue is truly one of a lack of supply, then why not build the thousands of units in the areas already zoned for housing, rather than fight to open up land that isn't?

Time and time again, Councils across the Province are asked to make exceptions "often substantial exceptions" to what is allowed under our

Official Plans. We see requests to amend the zoning to allow 20 houses where currently one stands or a 20-storey building where the zoning allows for seven storeys. And on and on it goes.

Municipal Official Plans are collaboratively developed, provincially approved, municipal planning documents that set out what can be built and where in a given municipality.

It's a plan that makes clear, that when you buy a piece of land, you know what can be built on it. And what can't.

Yes, OPs are meant to be flexible. They aren't carved in stone, but who gets to decide how much change in a community is reasonable? Whose vision of a community takes precedence? The Municipal Council elected to serve the people who live there and work there, or a for-profit driven industry whose primary consideration is their financial bottom line?

The planning goals of a profit-driven development industry are clearly different than those of a community-focused Municipal Council. One focuses on an individual corporate bottom line and the other the community building, socio-economic bottom line.

Land-use planning decisions made within the context of the Provincially compliant zoning bylaws of one's municipality are not obstructive or a capitulation to ?NIMBYism? but rather responsible leadership of the communities we serve.

Is there a housing supply issue? Absolutely. But conflating increased availability with affordability doesn't address the central issue. We need more than just more housing, we need more housing options. And in particular, purpose built rental housing.

Communities grow and evolve. But the drivers of community change should be the community itself.

If we are to develop a shared bottom line of appropriate growth, we ? municipal leaders, residents, business owners and the development industry alike ? need to work together to identify and deliver the housing needs unique to our communities so that we build a positive future and a vibrant community.

That's all for this week. As always if you would like to get into contact with me please feel free to contact me anytime by phone 905-727-3123 ext. 4746 or by email tmrakas@aurora.ca and if you would like to sign up for more newsletters and council updates then please visit Mrakas.ca/contact to join the growing list of Aurorans that are staying informed.