

Limited options remain to address affordable housing crunch

By Brock Weir

Council may have balked at what is considered affordable housing in Aurora, but there are limited options on the horizon to address the issue.

Over the last two weeks, Councillors have discussed different means of encouraging developers to increase the number of affordable units being built in their projects through the practice of 'bonusing', or allowing builders to contribute to the community in exchange for certain conditions in their buildings.

'The planning act allows for a density bonusing provision, provided we have that policy in our provincial plan,' said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, responding to questions from Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'The tool is there and the mechanism would be at the time Council is dealing with a rezoning to consider additional density, Council can impose, as a condition of that approval, a requirement for community benefits and entering into an agreement with the applicant. Any approval for additional height [of the proposed building] or number of units would be contingent on a bonusing agreement.'

With zoning already approved on a high rise building going into Aurora's 2C lands in the southwest quadrant of St. John's Sideroad and Leslie Street, one of the few opportunities already on the horizon that Council could consider bonusing is a new condo building proposed by developers of the former Highland Gate Golf Course, opined Councillor Gaertner.

In areas such as this, Aurora's official plans call for five storey buildings with bonusing up to seven stories. Geranium, the site developers, however, propose a 10 storey complex.

'The only opportunity would be Yonge Street with Highland,' she said, with Mr. Ramunno in agreement, noting other chances might come up if landowners approach the town with applications to rezone their properties. 'It is very important for seniors to be able to age in place in their own community. There is not a lot of opportunity at this point in time, unless you have a fair amount of money. I wouldn't mind seeing us do something about this.'

At the Committee level the previous week, Councillor John Abel offered affordable housing opportunities will have offshoot benefits down the road in retaining residents.

'Often people cringe [at the term Affordable Housing] because they think it is subsidized,' he said. 'Our children are migrating away from Aurora. They can't afford to live here. They can't find an affordable place to rent. We can't sustain service people to live in Aurora. They have to come from out of town.'

Further opportunities down the road could come in the form of new rental units being built, added Mr. Ramunno, who said incoming developers are increasingly looking at rental housing projects.

'There are a number of elements that play into [affordable housing],' added Mayor Dawe. 'The Region is really the driver for this, not the local municipalities. We can always do better and look at ways to be more creative in that, but it is very much a partnership between us, the Region and developers. One of the biggest drawbacks, quite frankly, is the cost of land in Aurora. It is a huge drag on creating affordable housing, so there are a lot of pieces at play.'

From the perspective of Councillor Harold Kim, addressing affordable housing is a significant issue for Aurora.

'I think one of the challenges of affordable housing in Aurora would be for allowing the density and height accommodations,' he said. 'In order for even more affordable housing, units will get smaller and density will get denser, and the only way to do that is get higher.'

CORRECTION

In last week's article on Affordable Housing, which appeared on Page 6, the last quote in the story was misattributed to Councillor Michael Thompson. It was actually said by Councillor Jeff Thom, and the paragraph should have read: 'We're above the Regional average, and incomes are higher for Aurora as well,' said Councillor Jeff Thom. 'I am not criticising [but] if this is what the upper threshold is for affordable housing and we're deriving policies from that, I think most people would agree that \$461,000 is a definition for affordable housing.' We regret the error.