

Mayor talks affordable housing in annual Chamber address



Affordable housing was a top-of-mind issue last Wednesday when Mayor Tom Mrakas delivered his annual "State of the Town" address to the local business community at a luncheon hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Held at the Royal Venetian Mansion on Industrial Parkway South, the event was attended by local business leaders, Council members, Members of Parliament Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket-Aurora) and Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), and Provincial representatives.

As much as it was an opportunity for the Mayor to tout business success stories, it was also a chance to discuss important economic issues facing Aurora – including affordable housing.

"We're facing a generational housing crisis," said Mayor Mrakas in his presentation. "The reality is that while we're still considered a relatively affluent community, there is still a lot of people here struggling to make ends meet, families and individuals going paycheck to paycheck."

While Mayor Mrakas did not address Council's decision the previous week to block the development of a 55-bed transitional and emergency housing building for men on Yonge Street at Industrial Parkway South, he underscored Aurora's efforts to meet the goals set out in the municipality's Housing Pledge last fall to facilitate 8,000 new housing units by 2031.

One such effort, he said, was ongoing work related to Aurora's Downtown Streetscape project. While this will see significant improvements that will benefit local businesses, he said, it will also facilitate housing in the downtown core by making it "cheaper to build housing as the urban design work that we traditionally require developers to undertake will already be done by the Town."

"The reality is we're redirecting a lot of our expected population growth to the downtown as well as the GO Major Transit Station Area (MTSA)," he said. "I think all of you know I am very passionate about housing in general and that is because this is one of the most important roles we can play as a municipality in shaping our community. I have advocated hard to protect the Town's autonomy in local planning matters and I am thankful this advocacy has paid off."

A "great new relationship" forged between the Town and Paul Calandra, Ontario's Minister of Housing, has resulted in the reversal of what Mayor Mrakas described as "bad land use decisions."

"I will strongly advocate for what we need and strongly oppose any measure imposed on us by other levels of government if they do not align with our vision for the community," he said. "At the same time, we have to be very real about the crisis we're facing. We urgently need more housing. We're expected to grow to more than 85,000 people by 2051 with over 41,000 jobs here in Aurora. It's vital that we build the kind of housing that people coming to Aurora can actually afford."

Fewer people can afford single-family detached homes, he said, but, at the same time, "we simply don't have the space to build that many more detached homes" in the community. Therefore, more options are needed.

"Our businesses?..need people, need customers, need employees," he said. "We want talented, dedicated, and hard-working people to come here and grow and strengthen our community. The reality is that many people who want to live here end up living elsewhere because it's cheaper. The good news is we're taking this very seriously and so are our Provincial and Federal colleagues."

"Late last year I signed our housing pledge to the province, a commitment to ensure that 8,000 new homes are built over the next seven years. To support this, the Province set up its \$1.2 billion Building Faster Fund where they will provide funding to municipalities who are on track to meet their housing targets to help with the infrastructure costs needed to support new developments."

"Over the next few years, things are going to ramp up here in Aurora. Just this year alone, we approved more than \$174 million in new construction across the Town. We're hitting our Regional growth targets and we got 1,000 more units that just came into the pipeline from two new developments on Berczy and Metcalfe. I know development can often be a touchy subject in our community. Some are concerned with the pace of development, construction, and worried about our stable neighbourhoods and the character of our Town. Some stress to me the need to build, to do our part to ensure an entire generation of young people aren't left behind, priced out of ever owning a home. Our vision is to grow responsibly, strategically, in a way that protects our built form while fostering the development of much-needed housing options now and into the future."

While it is a "touchy subject," the Mayor also stressed Council's protection of heritage properties "18 new designations in the last year" as well as the importance of protecting Aurora's so-called "stable neighbourhoods."

"I won't make any apologies for protecting any of these heritage properties," he said. "I really do believe we have the ability to strike a balance, building the housing we need while protecting our built form heritage. One key way we're going to do this is by exploring as-of-right pre-zoning along Leslie and Bayview, and in our downtown and around the GO Station. Pre-zoning means developers and property owners won't have to go through a long process of rezoning their land to build. It is already done for them. They know exactly what they can build as-of-right and our community knows what's allowed to be built in our Town. We will, of course, give careful consideration to the allowable heights and densities to ensure new builds fit with our community."

"We made sure our updated OP (Official Plan) is ready so we can implement a community planning permit system, another tool that combines zoning, site plan, and minor variances processes into one application with shorter approval timelines. Our hope is that policies like this will result in not just more condos but also what we call "missing middle" housing: townhouses, stacked duplexes, fourplexes and secondary and garden suites. That's because we know that housing affordability depends on housing diversity."

Affordable housing within the OP is defined as housing that does not exceed 30 per cent of lower-to-medium-income earners' yearly take-home.

"This kind of affordable housing is not always what developers want to build. It simply is not as affordable. We cannot rely on or expect a private business to address a public need. That is why government, including us, need to incentivize our development partners in building more affordable units, and that includes purpose-built rentals. That's precisely what we're doing by developing our own Made in Aurora Affordable Housing Action Plan and Affordable Housing Toolkit, which we worked on with Toronto Metropolitan University."

?We're actively looking at implementing policies like an Affordable Housing Community Improvement Plan or CIP that specifies the incentives we can offer developers to build more affordable housing across all of Aurora. While it is still in development, our updated CIP could identify surplus municipal lands that could be leased or sold at below market value. We could potentially waive certain planning and development fees as well as have property tax-based incentives. We're also looking to develop a new online e-permit tool that fast tracks applications that are appropriately zoned and meet a minimum requirement of affordable housing, as well as possibly eliminating the minimum parking requirements for new developments in our MTSA, making it cheaper to build.?

Also potentially on the horizon is ?fiscal firepower? from the upper levels of government to make this happen.

?We most certainly don't want to burden our residents and our businesses with tax increases,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?That is why we need support from both the Federal and Provincial governments. I am confident we will soon be tapping into that \$1.2 billion Provincial Building Faster Fund and what's perhaps most exciting is the Federal government's new Housing Accelerator fund. Tapping into this funding will be key for us to deliver many of the programs that will result in more affordable housing.?

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