

More public input needed on Oak Ridges Moraine review: environmentalist

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents will soon have a chance to sound off on the future review of both the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan and Greenbelt Plan.

Council approved future consultation sessions last week after a local environmentalist came forward with concerns over what she said she felt was the loosening of restrictions put in place to protect the Moraine.

Judy Gilchrist, a member of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust, as well as a member of the Town's Environmental Advisory Committee, was responding to a report before Council last Tuesday. It outlined comments municipal staff were prepared to make to the Province on the Oak Ridges Moraine legislation following public open houses held last month in King, Whitchurch-Stouffville, and East Gwillimbury.

'Consideration should be given to providing greater flexibility with respect to the land severance policies for large parcels in the Countryside Designation, providing there would be no adverse impact on any natural heritage or hydrogeological features' reads the first comment in the report put forward by Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning.

'Consideration should also be given to allowing municipal facilities in the Countryside Designation where it could be demonstrated there would [be] no adverse impact on any natural heritage or hydrogeological features.'

Additional comments included greater flexibility towards small scale developments, such as eliminating 'onerous' zoning requirements, updated policies towards wind power generation, greater authority given to municipalities to combat tree cuttings outside of existing legislation under the planning act, more specific policies on what constitutes a 'site alteration' on Moraine lands, and a greater role being taken by the Province in interpreting various aspects of the plan.

In her comments, Ms. Gilchrist spoke out against anything which could lead to greater flexibility when it comes to protecting Moraine lands. She also argued that although there had been three consultations elsewhere in York Region, there needed to be significantly greater input from Aurora residents.

'It is too big a piece of legislation not to have robust and thoughtful input from all citizens of Aurora,' said Ms. Gilchrist. 'It is a long-term land use planning document that defines not only what is needed by citizens of today and voters of today, but all of the citizens of Aurora into the future. I think it is worth taking the time to pause and give it some good, robust input.'

'There is no haste to rush this one through and endorse it tonight. I can tell you I disagree with having greater flexibility in the policies that govern the Oak Ridges Moraine. As was noted in the report, and rightfully so, Aurora was already granted several exemptions to the protection levels that the rest of the Moraine has to adhere to.'

Speaking of these exemptions, Ms. Gilchrist referred to it as 'death by 1,000 cuts.'

Potential changes to the legislation need to examine direct health and environmental connections, she added. Potential is on the table to make 'Really good, solid, concrete suggestions with examples' and that can only come if the consultation is done right, she concluded.

At the end of the day, it was an argument Council agreed with. Making a motion to refer the report back to staff for 'proper Aurora consultation', Councillor John Gallo said he was 'somewhat floored' that the comments came straight to Council to forward directly to the Region.

'Aurora residents have not had a chance to take a look at this and provide input,' he said.

Councillor Sandra Humfries said she agreed and said further focus needed to be put on 'our own area.'

"We have to have our own public consultation here to really share what this really means to our residents and be able to endorse this or not," she said.

Speaking to the comments around the table, Mr. Ramunno said the comments came to Council now as it was important for the scheduled public consultation sessions to be complete before reporting back to Council and this was the first opportunity to do so. While Ontario hasn't formally commenced their legislation review, there is still time to go back to the public "whether holding off on approving the comments made last week, or amending them after they had been sent to the Region.

Councillor Paul Pirri, on the other hand, said he did not believe all the points in the report were necessarily bad ones, but wished they came to the Environmental Advisory Committee for review. While he did not object with forwarding the comments to the Region now, he said he welcomed the opportunity to revise them later.

"If there are issues or problems with them we have them out in the open, the public can comment on them, and I think that is a pretty fair way for the public to move about in this process," he said.

For Councillor Evelyn Buck, review of the Oak Ridges Moraine legislation was "essential", but not necessarily for the reasons shared by other members of Council. In her view, it was important for the Province to take a hard look at whether the Legislation was working and whether it was "as she viewed "creating "hardships" for residents living on the Moraine.

"I don't think the act intended it to be like that, and the review is completely timely," said Councillor Buck, on processes residents need to go through for variances. "I have no problem at all with the recommendation that staff are making for greater flexibility. At the same time, I don't have any problem with Ms. Gilchrist's contention there hasn't been enough opportunity for public input.

"It isn't wonderful and there certainly might be time for comments but summertime is not the time to look for input from the public. The people who would be most interested in the position the Town is taking on the Oak Ridges Moraine act are the people that live within the Oak Ridges Moraine and are most familiar with the hardship it has created for them. They are like second-class citizens, who bought beautiful properties in a beautiful area of Town and suddenly find themselves like prisoners of their own homes in that they are only allowed to do what some minion in a cell decides they should be allowed to do."