

Pledge of 8,000 new housing units by 2031 supported by Council

Council members are backing a housing pledge that will see Aurora facilitate the construction of 8,000 new units in the community by 2031.

Local lawmakers took their first review of the Town's draft new housing pledge at last week's General Committee meeting.

While the Province's decision to tie the passage of housing pledges to granting Strong Mayor powers to nearly 30 Ontario communities by October 31 was a matter of contention around the table, what garnered nearly unanimous support was the housing target.

"We are in the midst of a housing crisis decades in the making," said Mayor Tom Mrakas. "I know we live in the era of soundbites and clickbait but the simple truth of it is there are no easy or quick fixes to address it. It did not happen overnight and it certainly won't be solved overnight. It will take all levels of government to put politics aside and work together to ensure our residents, current and future, have a place to call home. Recognizing that municipalities play a vital role in moving new housing forward, the Province has asked us all to do our part to make housing a priority.

"At the June meeting of Council, members voted unanimously to direct our staff to work on our number, Aurora's housing pledge, for our community. As you see in the comprehensive staff report on tonight's agenda, staff have identified our number as 8,000 units. According to staff's estimate, Aurora can accommodate 8,000 new places for current and future residents to call home while at the same time meeting the terms of our Official Plan (OP). And the Province clearly agrees with our staff's number as the Province has also set Aurora's target housing at 8,000 units.

"So, what does this pledge to build 8,000 housing units mean? It is important to understand that this number pertains to permits issued. This means we need to consider all approved applications, those at the OLT under review, as well as applications under review by staff that will be in front of Council soon. From pipeline to permit. It means shovels in the ground for those applications already approved. For instance, an application like Highland Gate, approved in 2016, can still contribute to the total 8,000 with 144 units because it has phases awaiting permits to be issued. It is the permits issued that matter for our housing target. Currently we have 7,519 units in the pipeline or nearly 94 per cent of our target and given that fact, staff are confident that we can meet our housing target. We can meet our target without excessive development of our Town or development that is beyond what we have envisioned in our OP."

Aurora, he concluded was in a "strong position" and the draft OP was created in a way that "works for our community."

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said the pledge was "long overdue" and cited the "excessive printing of money" in causing "extremely high inflation and interest rates" contributing to the housing crisis.

"There are students in Ontario right now that are opting to rent a parking spot to live in a van just to go to post-secondary school. I know this is not Aurora, but it is not like we're really far off from this reality," she said. "There are people who are living in tents and in forests, we just don't see it, it's hidden, and the reality is we need more housing. People work hard, they go to school, they work, they learn, and they should be able to prosper from their hard work. Right now, we don't have these options. We need to do our due diligence to make that happen. We can't be standing in the way of this.

"Everybody knows I have been supportive in density, especially around the MTSA (Major Transit Station Area) and so long as we have a plan forward we can put some density where it makes sense. We need to commit to this and this is a solution: we need to commit to this housing pledge to ensure that there are some places for people to live, work and prosper and today we're sending that message. I am supporting this. Let's get some of the shovels in the ground and get people in homes. People's kids deserve to be able to buy a house in their own hometown and we need to provide that option. I am in support of this."

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim offered a similar view, also citing the financial incentives the Provincial Government has earmarked for communities like Aurora that are contingent on municipalities meeting their pledged targets.

‘We have always talked about our financial wellbeing, we are in good financial stead, and we have the opportunity to collect more monies from the Province without us having to do anything more than going about our business the way we have been doing’. Right now, in terms of the housing pledge, I am all for it. I think it is something that is needed right now that is publicly out there, that this our pledge, this is our goal, and it just provides proof [of] what we have been doing all along and going above and beyond what every other municipality has been doing with regards to their growth targets.

‘We’re at a point in time where all three levels of government are aligned, whether it takes six months or three to five years, I sense that there is a real motivation to help alleviate this housing crisis.’

Support also came from Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson who said the housing crisis has impacted all age groups, but sought assurances that the resources would also be there to support an increased need in infrastructure due to growth.

‘It is important we have growth in our communities, but it needs to be balanced, smart and responsible,’ he said. ‘If we accelerate the development of the community and bring in more people, we want to make sure that we have the infrastructure, we have the amenities, we have the facilities to also meet that need so that there is not necessarily a negative impact to existing residents.

‘If we support this pledge and move forward, how else can we make sure that as we bring forward these initiatives to get the shovels in the ground and get these buildings built and people into these homes, that we also ensure that we have all of the infrastructure necessary to support this accelerated growth?’

More questions, however, were raised by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo who disagreed that the housing pledge, as proposed, dovetailed with the draft OP, suggesting that as it stands, the draft OP calls for the addition of 8,360 units over the next 30 years.

‘I don’t believe it follows our draft OP and it probably shouldn’t because this is something extraordinary and if it moves forward, we should probably, because we haven’t completed it, adjust our Official Plan if this is the approach we’re taking. I am not of the opinion that we should be leaving money on the table if we’re able to reach some of those targets. I am not convinced that we can; however, I wouldn’t be in favour of not trying, because we may.

‘Appropriate developments that make sense to us should move forward and should move forward quickly, if we can. I am not against that. I think what I am trying to do is be very clear that it doesn’t fit our Official Plan.’

While Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she would save most of her questions for the Council meeting at the end of this month, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese weighed in. He agreed that the goal was ‘optimistic’ but said they were ‘nonetheless achievable’ if external circumstances beyond Aurora’s control, like water and wastewater, a responsibility of the Region, are in place.

‘These aren’t trivial and I am not convinced that we can meet these targets but support the concept of building housing as Councillor Gilliland has just said, and the need for doing that’ and that it meets the intent of the Official Plan,’ he said. ‘Our residents deserve that. I am, however, mindful of the responsibility my Council colleagues and I have to acquire the bonus revenue as suggested’ we need to meet these targets, it would be irresponsible of us not to do that.’

By Brock Weir
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