

Province's housing plans get formal thumbs-down from Council

The Province's new housing plans received a formal thumbs-down from local lawmakers at a Special Council Meeting last week.

The new Council got down to business for the first time last Tuesday in a meeting convened to discuss Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, which was approved at Queen's Park on Monday.

The controversial Bill, which has been the subject of scrutiny at Council tables across the Province, has raised concerns on a number of fronts since it was first introduced at the end of last month.

Among its criticisms is a hit on the ability for towns and cities to collect development charges (DCs) from incoming developers to pay for growth, watering down the ability for Conservation Authorities to review planning proposals from an environmental perspective, and removing municipalities from having the final say in how they grow and address Provincial growth targets.

Going into the meeting, staff reported to Council that the Bill would result in a loss of 20 to 30 per cent of DC revenues, which could mean a hit on municipal service levels.

“Despite being responsible for some of the most important immediate services our residents need – roads, sewers, water, policing, EMT, fire, long-term care, housing, public health, and those are just to name a few – our ability to deliver these services are increasingly limited by the ever-changing scope of our authority,” said Mayor Tom Mrakas, speaking to his motion calling on Council to reject the tenets of Bill 23. “In particular as it speaks to growth and development. Indeed, as I have said before, the biggest challenge we face as a Council and community is our limited authority to ensure community focused-growth and development. Bill 23 not only fails to give us the tools we need, it strips us of the ability to use the ones that we have. We have a housing crisis in this country and it affects every community large and small. But it does not affect each community in the same way. The diversity of housing needs are a function of a complex, often community. Specific set of factors that cannot simply be generalized in a one size fits all policy statement.

“Do we need more housing? Absolutely. But what kind of housing? How much and where? Macro planning objectives are the purview of the Province and are reflected in the Provincial policy statements and related legislation with the expectation that municipalities will create a community level plan that will affect those broader policy goals. The Province sets the targets: housing, population, density, and the municipalities create the plans to meet those targets.”

Aurora, he continued, has “consistently met” the Province's growth targets and housing objectives, with Aurora growing by 12 per cent between 2016 and 2021, more than double the Provincial average.

“We have been encouraging growth of the much-needed missing middle, the gentle density our community wants for years and we have seen an increase in these types of developments but not enough. We could do more if we have the authority to enforce our Official Plan. If Bill 23 is adopted as is, we will have even less authority to incentivise the development of much needed attainable housing. Even more concerning is we will have drastically-reduced ability to fund the services our residents need both now and in the future. The impact of this Bill on the municipal taxpayer is simply staggering. The proposed reduction in development charges is estimated to cost taxpayers collectively in the billions of dollars.”

The cost of infrastructure, he added, “doesn't simply disappear” and deducing DC charges could either result in “higher property taxes, drastically reduced services, or, quite frankly, both.”

“There is little evidence that any of the measures in this Bill will build the housing we need,” he concluded. “It won't be built where we need it or at the price our residents can afford. Bill 23 effectively guts many of the legislative mechanisms we rely upon as a municipality to fund our infrastructure needs, plan future parks and amenities, protect our natural and built heritage, and plan for growth and development. I do agree with the Province that urgent action is needed to address the housing crisis in our communities

but I strongly oppose to the proposed methods of achieving it.?

This was a view shared by Council and following Mayor Mrakas' introduction of his motion, discussions continued with Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson questioning how municipalities will be expected to make up for a loss in development charge revenue. The attitude from the Province of 'we'll figure it out later' doesn't cut it, he added.

'For decades, municipalities and AMO (Association of Municipalities of Ontario) have been advocating to the Provincial government that there is an infrastructure deficit. Municipalities own 60 per cent of the infrastructure but get about 10 cents of every tax dollar,' said Councillor Thompson. 'We cannot maintain the infrastructure without the Province's help and DCs are critical to maintain that' for them to take pieces of that away so growth no longer pays for growth is irresponsible in my opinion and there has got to be a plan to allow for municipalities to make up for the loss and it needs to be detailed and explained to us long before this legislation is passed.?

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland noted that she supported attainable housing but as far as Bill 23 goes the 'consultation piece' was missing. Also taking a hit through the Bill, she said, was the Town's efforts to have guidelines in place to protect the Town's so-called Stable Neighbourhoods from incompatible development.

'Now they are completely irrelevant,' she said. 'I say, 'what's really the point?' We have these protections in place for a reason. I am disappointed at development charges. At the end of the day, these DCs ebb and flow and we use the 10-year capital plan to ensure we're kind of in a positive space?

'We're going to have to buckle up our straps and it's going to end up coming down onto the tax base, which is something right now we just don't need. Another big alarming part for me is the Conservation Authorities. It is pretty much eliminating some of the reviewing and commenting on these development projects and putting a lot of that pressure on to the municipality. We don't have staff or the expertise to be handling these files. What's going to happen? We have the Conservation Authorities who are the experts. Should we not be using this body to handle these sensitive issues? We're lacking this collaborative approach and should be holding our Conservation Authorities near and dear.?

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese agreed that Bill 23 will see costs fall to the taxpayers and requested a further breakdown on its impact in the coming weeks as the new Council begins the budget process.

'This government has decided they're going to increase the taxes of every human being who is a taxpayer in this Province and I don't know how they can do this without thinking about walking it back,' he said. 'I think these submissions that we're making are vital to make sure that they understand the egregious violation that they have made, but we have to be clear: there has to be a shared responsibility here, not just lay it all down on the municipalities.?

Added Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, 'Heritage preservation is going to take a hit in this Bill. It's going to be harder for us to protect our built heritage. There are so many problems with this Bill. If we don't have [the Conservation Authorities'] help with long-term planning, how are we going to do the best we can in the context of the climate change.

'I know we want to put our municipal reservations front and centre but I think as a municipality in the wider context it would be appropriate for us to mention these other things.?

Concluding the discussion, Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim said Bill 23 becomes 'more far-reaching' the more you read it. While he said the Bill would indeed reduce DCs, Community Benefit Charges and parkland dedication, he zeroed in on the overall financial implications.

'Even when people consider that growth paid for growth, which I always thought was untrue, some studies had calculated that to be about 80 per cent and with the current DC revenue reduction we're looking at probably the neighbourhood of 70 per cent,' he said, before turning his attention to the Bill's heritage impacts.

?To essentially eliminate the option of listing a property on a heritage list? that is quite drastic and it is quite frankly offensive to a community. It's not just fiscal heritage, it's also natural resources. Now they are saying that you can't even list the natural heritage, water bodies, or anything else as heritage unless it is part of a development. That goes to how extreme this Bill is.?

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