

As new Provincial government prepares to take office, Council delivers message on Greenbelt

By Brock Weir

It was one of the most heated issues to dog Premier-designate Doug Ford on the 2018 campaign trail, but once he takes office this week, the Progressive Conservative leader will receive a pointed message from Council on the preservation of Ontario's Greenbelt. Mr. Ford, along with our local MPPs-elect Christine Elliott (Newmarket-Aurora) and Michael Parsa (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill) are set to arrive at Queen's Park to be formally sworn in this Friday.

Just days after the election on June 7, however, Aurora Council moved to formulate a message that the Government should keep its hands off the Greenbelt.

Council took the measure following a motion from Councillor John Abel, who alluded to a closed door meeting between Mr. Ford and land developers, promising to open up chunks of the protected Greenbelt for future development, a move which prompted immediate fury from environmentalists and residents alike, and resulted in backtracking from Mr. Ford shortly thereafter.

In his motion, Councillor Abel called on Aurora to take a stand with its municipal neighbours to undertake continued action to maintain and grow the current Greenbelt, of which the Oak Ridges Moraine is a part and strongly urge the Province to extend Greenbelt protection to include the appropriate white belt lands within the inner ring, lands that are most immediately vulnerable to development in the Province.

The Greenbelt is an integral component of land use planning that complements the Growth Plan to encourage smart planning, the reduction of sprawl, protection of natural and hydrogeological features and agricultural lands, said Councillor Abel in his motion, noting a similar motion was passed by the City of Oakville. The Greenbelt has protected 1.8 million acres of farmland, local food supplies, the headwaters rivers and important forests and wildlife habitat for more than 12 years.

A permanent Greenbelt is an important part of the planning for sustainable communities [and] there is a tremendous amount of land already planned and available in excess of the development needs of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) without weakening protections provided by the Greenbelt.

Efforts to open the Greenbelt, he continued, open the door for land speculators to build expensive homes at immense profits in remote areas and would move the urban boundary, fostering sprawl, increased traffic, and increased taxes.

It was in the Provincial Election that there was some talk about the Greenbelt and although it wasn't pursued, in Oakville they thought it prudent to advise the Provincial government that we should protect the Greenbelt and be very careful about the Whitebelt area and how to handle that buffer zone, Councillor Abel told his colleagues before the matter came up for a vote. We have two members of the government [and I thought it was important] they know where their Council stands and that it be relayed to them and the governing legislation.

Council members agreed, voting for the motion unanimously.

Councillor Paul Pirri, however, cautioned that reinforcing Greenbelt protection could have consequences down the line.

I just wanted to point out that there are many individuals and many people who blame the Greenbelt for the escalation of property values and this is one of the largest contributors to the cost of housing across Ontario, he said. I just want to point out that if people are really strongly in favour of the low cost of housing, this goes against that. With that said, from an environmental standpoint, I definitely support it so I will be voting in favour.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, on the other hand, had a different viewpoint.

I think it is known I am very much in favour of low cost housing, but not at the expense of the environment, she said.