

Aurora investigates measures to steer developments in south end

Builds on Yonge Street south of the CN Rail bridge could be built under closer scrutiny following a Council motion at its most recent meeting.

Council directed staff to study defining the Yonge Street South corridor's boundaries, appropriate densities, unit permissions, building heights, built form and transitions to nearby low-density neighbourhoods with an eye of bringing back recommendations for clear development parameters and any required Official Plan Amendments for this area.

The move was part of a motion brought forward by Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson also calling for an Interim Control Bylaw (ICBL) to be placed on the area while the Town undertook the study.

While Council was supportive of the study, the ICBL raised questions and concerns around the Council table and was ultimately defeated.

Critics argued that the area was already reviewed as part of Aurora's latest Official Plan (OP) and putting an ICBL in place could undermine the principles of the OP.

Our OP is one of the Town's primary tools for shaping development and managing growth, said Councillor Thompson at last week's meeting. It sets out our long-term vision, the principles behind the vision, and the policy Council relies on to evaluate whether change is appropriate, compatible, and in the public's best interest. Those aren't my words, they are the words we, as Council approved and embedded in our OP.

I brought forward this motion today because I do not believe we have that clarity when it comes to the development along the Regional corridor, particularly where it intersects with the intent and fundamental principles of the Yonge Street South Secondary Plan, commonly referred to as OPA 34.

We have detailed, carefully crafted policies in OPA 34, he continued. There is no ambiguity for estate residential, cluster residential, suburban residential lands. We need the same degree of clarity in the regional corridor. Our Official Plan explicitly allows Council to revisit policies when issues arise during implementation, especially when conflicts emerge that were not anticipated. This is exactly the situation we are facing today. This motion does not prejudice outcomes or undermine growth and development. It simply allows us to do what good planning requires: step back, work with the community and stakeholders, reconcile conflicting policies, and provide clear direction on what development along Yonge Street South should look like. That clarity is essential for residents, for applicants, for staff, and for this Council.

But Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo described the ICBL as one of the strongest and most disruptive tools available to a municipality, which should give people pause. Moreover, he said an ICBL over land already covered under the recent OP sends a troubling message that we lack confidence in the planning framework that we ourselves just approved.

Aurora, like every municipality in Ontario, is under increased pressure to deliver housing, not just in theory, but in practice, said Councillor Gallo. Strategic corridors like Yonge Street are specifically identified to accommodate growth in a way that is transit-supportive and responsible, rather than pushing development into stable neighborhoods or greenfield areas. Freezing development in a designated intensification corridor, even temporarily, works directly against our housing targets. It delays units that are already planned within an approved policy framework and introduces uncertainty at a time when predictability is essential to actually deliver housing.

Similar opposition came from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who said the Town spent a lot of money to develop the OP to determine what our Yonge Street corridor is going to look like, and was opposed to halting development on one of the most major corridors in our Town.

'We have tools like zoning, the holding provisions, the site plan control, the urban design guidelines' so for us to come in in such a short period of time and put an ICBL in place so soon after the Official Plan, it sends a message that we're really unsure about our growth framework that we just approved. To me, that has implications on our credibility, certainty and potential appeals. If the issue is clarity rather than direction, I think we have better tools, and that's what I'm looking for.'

Director of Development Marco Ramunno noted that there are just two active applications the ICBL would impact, which still had a way to go before being shovel-ready.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said that he agreed the size and the depth of what's defined as the Regional Corridor needs further definition.

'The Region approved these corridors along Regional roads to stimulate increased density for all the right reasons' to increase housing supply, of course, but the corridor needs to be better defined, in my opinion,' he said. 'I believe the issues surrounding the Regional corridors have to be better interpreted. We've had issues where part of an application [is within a corridor and part of it is out, and it's left to Council to make these judgements in the best interests of the residents in the area, as well as the community at large.'

He noted ICBLs have been 'criticized when they've been used to unduly restrict development, and it's known to restrict housing supply and it freezes construction.'

'Certainly, I don't take an ICBL lightly,' added Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim. 'We don't use it often, but we did use it in 2018 during our discussions on Stable Neighbourhoods. We also used it when we were having a discussion on 1289 Leslie and Wellington. I would submit that we used the Interim Control Bylaw for the benefit of the Town in those two situations and we had beneficial results.

'I do agree that it hasn't been long since we confirmed the Official Plan, but just because we spent a lot of time and we confirmed a plan or a policy, it doesn't mean that we can't go back and review it because I consider all policies or plans a living document that we revise from time to time when it's needed. For us to not review something when we have identified that it might need another look, I think it would be irresponsible to just not do anything just because we just confirmed it a year or two ago, or any policy for that matter.'

Mayor Tom Mrakas noted further examples of interim control bylaws in recent years.

'The study is frankly much needed as I think everyone agrees around this table, but to move forward and do a study without implementing an interim control bylaw, having that pause in place, what you do is you create an atmosphere where applicants are going to come rushing to the Town to put in applications before the study is completed so they can get in before the new parameters are set forth in the OP and updated,' said Mayor Mrakas.

'When we deal with these applications and we're in the midst of making changes, we say that, 'Well, we're looking at this, we're studying this area, we need some more time. So, we would like you to come back to another Public Planning [meeting] or we would like to take some more time while we finish this.' What do they do? They go straight to the tribunal. You're going to have more and more applications going straight to the tribunal without putting the pause in.'

(NOTE: An earlier version of the story, which appeared in February 5's print edition, stated both portions of the Motion were approved by Council, rather than just the study. We regret the error)

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