

Business park continues growth, but Councillor concerned about 'precedent'?

By Brock Weir

Aurora's business lands on the east side of Leslie Street continue to fill up following a decision of Council last week, but one Councillor is concerned that approving a smaller block of land for an incoming business could set a 'bad precedent' at Town Hall.

Council signed off on a new development on Eric T. Smith Way, near the new Bulk Barn headquarters just south of Don Hillock Drive. The land sale to an unspecified business was previously approved by Council in closed session, but was up for Council's consideration last week on a 'technical clarification' resulting in a shorter lot frontage and overall area.

This, argued Councillor Wendy Gaertner, did not fit into the overall vision for the area to provide large tracts of land for large employers.

'My fear is it sets up a bad precedent for carving up these larger tracts of employment land,' she said, stating Aurora is 'heavily reliant' on residential taxation. 'They are so important to our overall health. If we grant this severance it will potentially be detrimental to the Town's economic potential and potential to attract large businesses to Aurora. We need those jobs. We need the tax base. It is crucial. If we don't want our residential taxes to go sky high, it is crucial we have those high quality big businesses coming to Town.'

This, however, was not a concern shared by municipal staff, nor fellow members of Council.

Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, said he did not believe this would set a negative precedent for Aurora and many companies looking for lands to move or expand their business are looking for further flexibility in lot sizes.

The changes before Council, he added, conformed with Aurora's official plan.

'I am seeing interest and we're going to see that moving forward not only in our business park, but in the business park north of State Farm where you will see some lots within the planned subdivision where there will be boundary adjustment to create smaller parcels or combined parcels to create larger land holdings,' said Mr. Ramunno, noting this was a suitable size for employment in this particular area as it is at the end of the row and near a stormwater pond.

Responding to Councillor Gaertner's argument that moving forward with this was 'penny wise and pound foolish', Aurora CAO Neil Garbe said this is an opportunity to bring in a 'high quality employer' on a way that makes sense.

'[This severance] leaves us a full two acres on the other side with frontage on two sides, it is a rectangle as opposed to an odder shaped piece that would be, in all likelihood, used for parking or some other ancillary use for the main building,' said Mr. Garbe. 'The purchaser is a high quality employer. If the private sector was subject to the Sunshine List, all those employees would be on it. It is their corporate head office. It is the exact kind of employer we want to promote and it does leave us with a very good parcel we want to sell.'

Councillor Paul Pirri offered a similar take: 'This is very much a no-brainer and I would like to focus on bringing in high quality people. If they only need a little bit of space, we can bring in more.'

Councillor Gaertner's concerns with incoming employers on the Leslie Street lands are not limited to this business. She made similar comments when Bulk Barn re-located its headquarters to Aurora last year. While the move brought executive positions to the area, much of their development was taken up by warehouse space, a point she reiterated last week 'sparking a debate with Mayor Geoff Dawe on the 'quality' of these employment opportunities.