

Climate Action group calls on Aurora to push back on Bill 5

Local climate activists are calling on the Town of Aurora to push back on the Ontario Government's controversial Bill 5.

Formally entitled the Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act, the contentious piece of legislation is ostensibly designed to foster the economy and the development of homes, but critics say it removes critical protections for the environment while associated legislation may dilute the planning authority of local municipalities.

While the legislation has already been enacted through Royal Assent, advocates recently called on the Town of Aurora to push back against the Bill, citing that similar actions have caused the government to backtrack on other matters.

Delegating to this month's Committee of the Whole meeting was Kathy Duncan of Climate Action Newmarket-Aurora.

Duncan said that following Royal Assent, legal action will be coming forward to protest the Bill and, similar to some backtracking on legislation related to the Greenbelt, such a push-back could prove effective.

What it will impact is our right to shape our communities, to protect our lands, our water, our wildlife, and to be heard, said Duncan. Bill 5 is not just about speeding up mining projects that's only six of its 220-plus pages. Bill 5 provides the framework to overrule any and all provincial legislation and create special economic zones, which can be anywhere: the Greenbelt, Oak Ridges Moraine, or Provincial Parks like Algonquin, and with legal disclaimers built into the Bill such that there can be no recourse before, during or after any of the special projects.

Bill 5 actually guts environmental and endangered species protections, leaving in place a vague conservation plan where added dollars are pointless given the reduction of species protections. As noted by Ontario Nature, it's like bringing a bucket to a wildfire. At the hearings, nature groups pleaded endangered species are not a Jenga game. Even removing one could cause the entire system to fail. Bill 5's gutting of the term 'habitat' essentially means this: You're safe in your bedroom, but not your kitchen, your yard or your local grocery store. And once you're out of the bedroom, that's it. It's like walking out of emerg with no recovery plan. Even fresh water is no longer a guaranteed protection.

At hearings related to the Bill, Duncan said mining and energy companies noted that special economic zones were not needed and there was an appetite amongst them to keep in place strong environmental standards to protect Ontario's credibility internationally and their partnerships with First Nations communities were essential to their success.

We also heard Indigenous leaders say clearly they want to be at the table from the start, which they were not, she said, noting the meeting that evening began with a land acknowledgement specifically citing the Chippewas of Georgina Island, the closest First Nation to Aurora.

Bill 5 allows for ministerial zoning orders and special economic zone exemptions, which would override local planning. This includes the Town of Aurora's Official Plan that's already been signed off. There's been significant community consultation for that Plan, and essentially the Province could come along and completely annihilate it. Bill 5 could also allow the Province to force the Town to service growth areas that are not currently in capital budgets, burdening future taxpayers beyond current forecasts. It will strain water, wastewater, transit and road infrastructure. Within the 2024 Housing Needs Assessment, the Town notes that when done properly and regularly, housing needs assessments allow a community to answer fundamental questions, including how we can set meaningful housing targets and measure progress to support the right kind of housing for all residents. The provisions in Bill 5 risk this and are potentially at odds with Canada's housing plan.

Duncan noted her organization delegated to Newmarket Council on June 2 where Mayor John Taylor committed to sending a letter to the Province outlining concerns with the legislation and encouraged Aurora Council to follow suit.

Local Councillors, however, largely agreed that they need further information on the impacts the Bill will have on communities like Aurora before articulating their concerns to the Ontario Government.

“Mayor Taylor sent a letter to the Province outlining concerns, not opposition” and I agree with his sentiment that the Bills are complicated, they’re massive bills, they have a lot. There’s a lot of good stuff in it and there’s some stuff that there’s some concerns?” said Mayor Tom Mrakas. “We don’t have all the details. We understand the high-level of what the bills are suggesting” but they haven’t provided the details of what they’re actually going to be enacting. We need to know the details before we actually come out and say whether we’re in favour, or opposed, or whether we have concerns.”

A similar perspective was offered by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who said issuing a “blanket statement” on the entire Bill would be “ill-informed.”

“I’m sure there’s some good components to it with some good intent, but I think it’s safe to say that there are some things about it that are concerning,” she said, adding she would have liked to have seen more consultation before the Bills were passed.

By Brock Weir