

Clock now ticking for developers and builders to make good on plans

Developers and builders looking for zoning bylaw amendments to break ground in Aurora will have a set period of time to make good on their plans, following a Council decision last week.

In a unanimous vote last week, Council approved a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas which puts a 'sunset clause' in place on site-specific zoning amendments.

'We have seen many examples not just in our municipality but right across Ontario, even in Canada and in other countries where speculation [and] land banking occurs, and we see where Councils have made decisions where they have approved an application for development to occur and it just sits there and sits there,' said Mayor Mrakas at last week's meeting. 'With all the recent things going on in regards to the housing crisis and a lot of blame being put on municipal councils for delays, we also have to look at the other end of the stick, that there are delays on the other end where units are being approved [and] are not being built quickly enough.'

In York Region, he added, 50,000 units have been approved and are yet to be built.

Under the new rules, if a site-specific zoning bylaw amendment is issued and the resulting building permit is not issued under the Building Code within a specific timeframe, the bylaw will be automatically repealed and revert to its original zoning.

But the rules will also allow applicants to apply to Council for an extension to the window, which Planning Director Marco Ramunno said had to be a minimum of three years.

'If we're going to ask Councils to step it up and make decisions, we have to go to the other end and say when Councils approve an application, approve a development, that the developer has a certain period of time to actually get out of the ground and build those units and get them on the market, preferably affordable, in a timely manner, just as we have to make those decisions in a timely manner,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'I think that is only fair. It's not something that is being done right across the board, but it is something many municipalities are looking to and want to do.'

'I am in support of this,' said Councillor John Gallo, noting that the rules were similar to what was already on the books. '[This] expands it and codifies it, especially when an application comes to us. There is no ambiguity in terms of how much time a developer has to move forward on their project so it makes sense to me.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson who said he has seen multiple examples over the years of projects fizzling out, land changing hands, and plans being modified.

'I think it is good to have the ability to say, 'Listen, you have come to Council and asked for these changes and you have to move forward with it. You can't just sit on it until a better time or a better opportunity comes about.' I wish we could have done this sooner, but I fully understand that we are going to be at the forefront of this and I think in this case it is great to be leaders and put this forward.

'We do need these kinds of tools to move things along because when somebody comes to us to make the decisions, it is on the understanding that they are going to build something. That is how we're dealing with it, in good faith, and that they do as well.'

While he ultimately supported the motion, Councillor Harold Kim had a broader, more cautious view of the issue, stating that the economic ramifications of builders having to break ground when the time is not ideal should be given consideration.

'I am in support of the motion, there's a lot of positives in it, but my concern with all policies is I would rather have a partnership or incentivization-type of policy where you can send builders to build out at their stated timelines as opposed to a 'stick' policy where

you're penalizing them if they don't use it," he said.

"A couple of concerns came to mind was that the developers come in all shapes and sizes but different scale and sizes and you have some very large developers and also have a lot of smaller builders and contractors who are more economically sensitive to a policy like this, which I am concerned about. If a smaller developer buys one lot or two or three lots, and the economy turns around, they have to build out by a certain timeframe and our policies are not sensitive to that and we force them to build at a certain price point where they're not going to be able to even break even. You have to be concerned about those small businesses as well ? the 'mom and pop businesses' that try to make a living on a smaller scale."

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter