

Council calls on Province to scrap changes to planning process

By Brock Weir

Aurora is calling on the Province to scrap legislation that could see ultimate power to shape a community out of the municipality's hands and into the hands of an unelected board.

Council last week passed a motion brought forward by Mayor Tom Mrakas opposing Bill 108, stating it will have ?negative consequences on community building and proper planning.?

In his motion, Mayor Mrakas pointed out that legislation abolishing the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) in favour of a Local Planning Appeal Tribunal (LPAT) received unanimous, all-party support in the Ontario Legislature under the previous government in recognition that ?local governments should have the authority to uphold their provincially-approved Official Plans, to uphold their community-driven planning.?

The recently introduced Bill, announced by the Government as a measure to improve housing stock across the Province by cutting red tape, would reverse the decision, argued the Mayor, and put power back in the hands of an ?unelected? and ?unaccountable? body.

?At the end of the day when Bill 139 was introduced in the House that would look at making significant changes and abolish the OMB, it was quite an incredible amount of work and not just from elected officials, but residents and ratepayers getting together and speaking on behalf of needed changes to bring authority back to our local governments on how we evolve and grow as municipalities with respect to land use planning,? he told Council. ?My question to those MPPs who are sitting in the House now [is] why the change? What we call in political terms, why the flip-flop?

?This government talks about the fact they are ?for the people,? well, let's put the people first instead of the Party. That's what I see here. Everyone is toeing the party line and they are looking to make changes to legislation. Who is asking for it? When Bill 139 was introduced, it was elected officials across this Province and it was a majority of them that represented close to 70 per cent of the population of this province and that is why those changes were made. Who is asking for those changes now? I don't see the people up in arms saying we need to go back to a system that is flawed. At the end of the day, this is being driven by a for-profit industry that is looking to increase their profit margins.?

He went on to further challenge the Provincial Government's claim that the Bill is being proposed in the name of affordable housing, when the Bill encompasses myriad other pieces of legislation including the Conservation Authorities Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Environmental Protection Act, the Labour Relations Act, and more.

?They were put in place to safeguard our environment, our history, our health,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?Now, they are being basically jeopardized in the guise of affordable housing. I put forward this motion to say that we in Aurora oppose this Bill in its current state and that we would like the Government of Ontario to halt this Bill, stop, pause, whatever it is, and sit down with the elected officials and let's have a conversation of how we can achieve what we truly need and what we all agree we need, which is affordable housing.

?There is a housing crisis in Ontario, but it is not one of supply; it is one of affordable housing. At the end of the day, the talk is that the ?missing middle' that this is what will be able to be built if we provide and supply more supply of housing. Well, that missing middle can be built today. There is no red tape. You can go out and build bungalows, build low-rise to mid-rise apartments and that is not happening. That is not getting built. If bungalows were getting built, we wouldn't have an issue. The red tape is the development industry coming to Councils across this Province and asking for amendment after amendment and asking us to rip apart our official plans and our visions for our communities so they can increase their profits. It is not what the people want [and] it is time to sit down, work together and let's have planning that is for the people and not planning for profit.?

The Mayor's Motion received the unanimous approval of Council, although Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she had some concerns.

At issue was a wholesale opposition to the Bill. As the proposed legislation covers such a wide area, she questioned whether Council's opposition should be more specific and make their opposition as strong as possible.

Mayor Mrakas said he disagreed, saying he personally opposed the whole Bill.

?Some might not and I can't speak to those who might like some parts of it,? he said. ?As a developer, you'll just be able to cut a cheque to bypass some protections. That's in simple terms. It's a little bit more complicated than that. Each of the acts that are being affected are being affected to allow for easier access to the development community to come in and develop what they would like to instead of what municipalities would like.?