

Environmental groups hail rollbacks on Bill 66

By Brock Weir

Environmental groups both here in Aurora and across the Green Belt and Oak Ridges Moraine are celebrating a win this week after the Province announced it was nixing several portions of their so-called 'Open for Business' legislation that sparked alarm bells across Ontario for the negative impacts such measures could have had on the environment.

Formally listed as Bill 66, the Open for Business legislation could have potentially opened up key portions of the Greenbelt, Oak Ridges Moraine and other protected areas for business development, a move that saw swift and immediate reaction from municipalities like Aurora and various other stakeholders.

In a letter last week, however, Steve Clark, Ontario's Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, said the Government had heard the backlash and was backing down.

'The People of Ontario set a clear agenda for our government: they elected a government that believes in transparency and accountability for the people, they wanted a government that would clean up the regulatory environment and make Ontario open for business,' wrote Mr. Clark. 'Included in [the Bill 66] legislation, were proposed changes to the Planning Act that would create a new economic development tool, the open-for-business planning bylaw. The tool would be available to all local municipalities to ensure they can act quickly to attract businesses seeking development sites by streamlining land use planning approvals.

'The use of this tool would never have been approved at the expense of the Greenbelt and other Provincial interests like water quality or public health and safety. Our Made-In-Ontario Environmental Plan committed to strong enforcement action to protect our lakes, waterways and groundwater from pollution. We will build on the ministry's monitoring and drinking water source protection activities.

'That said, [our government] has listened to the concerns raised by MPPs, municipalities and stakeholders with regards to Schedule 10 of Bill 66 and when the legislature returns in February, we will not proceed with Schedule 10 of the Bill.'

This past December, Council voted to say no to this section of Open for Business legislation, passing a resolution rejecting future use of this planning tool.

Mayor Tom Mrakas hailed the Province's decision to roll back Schedule 10 as 'great news.'

This is a view shared by many local environmentalists, including Susan Walmer, Executive Director of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust, who made her position clear in a delegation to Council earlier this winter.

'I'm thrilled that we were able to mobilize a lot of voices at the municipal level, with MPPs and residents across Ontario, and that the Government listened and is removing schedule 10,' said Ms. Walmer. 'That is a wonderful action the government can take and that points to why public consultation is so important at the government level.'

The quick reaction of stakeholders, however, shouldn't have come as a surprise, she says. Since the Oak Ridges Moraine Act came into force nearly 20 years ago, Ms. Walmer says organizations like hers, along with government officials and members of the public alike, have worked hard to educate the public in why it is important to protect an environmental feature like the Oak Ridges Moraine, which is, in this area, headwater to all rivers flowing south into Toronto and north into Lake Simcoe.

'That is why there was such a powerful and immediate reaction from people all across Ontario, knowing the importance of the Moraine,' she said. 'We even heard from people outside the Province who had heard about the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Greenbelt and why it was so significant to Ontario and being held up as one of the bigger and best Greenbelt policies in the world.' While Schedule 10 might be a victory, Ms. Walmer questions that those who fought to have it removed from the legislation should not rest on their laurels. A number of additional environmental measures could be coming down the pipe from Queen's Park that deserve equal public scrutiny, she says, including a review of the Province's Growth Plan.

'We'll be looking at that next,' she says. 'The review time for that is February 28 and we also understand there might be a review of the Species At Risk Act. We don't know what the prescriptions to be allowed in it, but we know that Southern Ontario and southern Canada