

FRANKLY SPEAKING: Preserving Existing Communities

By MPP Frank Klees

Preserving Existing Communities

For most families, the single largest investment they will ever make is in the house that will be their home.

After months of searching listings and stalking open houses from one end of the GTA to the other, the third drive through this neighbourhood in as many weeks confirms that this is the perfect place. An established, mature community that seems to have it all: just the right type of housing, amenities close by, small parkettes well-maintained and apparently popular with both children and seniors.

Best of all, open green space that meanders through the community.

It seems a perfect fit, and so, the papers are signed, the deal is made and the family celebrates. Over the years, that house becomes a castle. The neighbours become friends and the simple collection of houses becomes a close-knit community.

The character of the neighbourhood is reflected in the pride of ownership, the well-kept homes and manicured lawns. The street parties. All there is to do now, is to enjoy that quality of life for which you've worked so hard over the years.

Beware of the Places to Grow Act

What can possibly interrupt that peaceful neighbourhood where you watched your children grow up, head off to college only to return now and again to rummage through their belongings in hopes of finding that vintage trading card? The trees now mature and the sounds and debris of construction activity long forgotten. Is it possible that those quiet streets can once again be invaded by bulldozers and heavy trucks and the sky filled with dust storms that cake windows and cars and patio furniture?

The answer is yes.

Coming to a neighbourhood near you (or yours) is the first wave of that construction tsunami. Community planners (so-called) who, if they have their way, will convince you that those green spaces around you, defined in the municipality's Official Plan as Parks and Open Space, are an economic wasteland and would best serve the public purpose if they were filled in with houses, multiple-unit dwellings or highrise condos.

Remember that premium you paid to back onto the golf course or that land you were told is zoned Open Space? Envision a cul-de-sac jutting out into that fairway or watching a multiple story building rising up that will offer a perfect view of your here-to-for private backyard to those lucky enough to have you in their sights.

Then ask yourself what has just happened to my neighbourhood, my quality of life and the value of my property. Can this really happen?

The answer is yes, and here's why: In 2005, the Ontario Liberal Government passed the Places to Grow Act and, a year later, it passed the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Not only does this legislation set out specific population targets for municipalities, it also mandates that a significant portion of that new growth must be achieved through intensification of existing built-up areas.

What is particularly offensive is that the sections dealing with intensification are so broad, that even if a local council denies an application for redevelopment of an existing community, a developer can appeal the application to the Ontario Municipal Board, claiming that it is consistent with the intensification provisions of the provincial policy. While I would not presume what the final decision would be after a costly hearing, the odds will no doubt be with the developer because of the provincial policy.

The Real Residents of Glenway Estates

A real life example of how families can be threatened with disruption of their community is playing out right here in Newmarket-Aurora. Residents of the Glenway community in Newmarket are experiencing this threat in the wake of an application that would impose an additional 730 housing units and significantly erode the open green space that characterizes their community. The Glenway Preservation Association is rallying support to oppose the development and Newmarket Council is in the process of reviewing the application. Most Councillors and residents know that even if Council rejects the application, it is a forgone conclusion that the next step will be a costly OMB hearing with no guarantees of success.

The Preserving Existing Communities Act, 2013

On Thursday, March 21, I will stand in the legislature to present a Private Members Bill for First Reading that, if passed, will ensure that a decision made by a municipal council, where intensification of an existing community is a factor and where the municipality has decided that it is not in the best interests of the residents of the municipality, that decision will be final and may not be referred to the Ontario Municipal Board.

The objective is to empower local councils to make the decisions they were elected to make and to be accountable to their voters for those decisions.

The bill will be debated on Thursday, April 18. I encourage you to show your support by signing a petition available through my office and please let me know if you would like to attend Queen's Park to observe the debate.

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