

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Land Use Issues in Aurora

By Stephen Somerville

Almost six years ago, I penned a series of columns about general land use issues in Aurora.

At the time, the two main things that this writer came away with after some rudimentary research was that Aurora was very much expected to share in the York Region intensification burden and that there was not a lot of land left in this town for development. The municipal intensification calculation prepared by York Region showed Aurora having an additional 2,800 residential units by 2031.

This translates to an average annual addition of 116 units until 2031 or a 27 per cent annual increase in residential dwelling construction.

Aurora has a current population of approximately 63,000. Our population has more than doubled since 1986 and is expected to grow to 75,000 by 2026.

But this whole issue raises many questions: to wit, will these units ensure that Aurora has more affordable housing? Will housing prices in Aurora stabilize or continue to soar, putting our dwellings out of the reach of Aurora's next generation of potential homeowners?

As well, should the province have the ability to overrule a communities' Official Plan, which in some cases, has taken years of discussion and debate to complete?

And finally, the question I want to deal with today, should we scrap the Ontario Municipal Board.

As you may have heard or read before the recent settlement was reached, Highland Gate Developments, after Aurora Council turned down its offer to sell the property for \$98M, took their case to the Ontario Municipal Board.

This situation was predictable as we have seen this occur before in a number of communities, including Glenway in Newmarket.

And the outcome is still the same.

The real estate developer introduces its plan, then they host a couple of community meetings, after which they make small non material changes to their plans. The revised plans are rebuffed by the community and their elected representatives. Then, at the first opportunity, the developer applies to the Ontario Municipal Board.

The people in the affected community are angry and want the Town to spend a considerable amount of money (usually in the hundreds of thousands of dollars on lawyers) to quash the plan.

Many other people in town, who are not directly affected by the development, are also angry, but for a different reason; they don't want to see their elected representatives approve any money to continue the fight.

In the end, two things happen. Either the town doesn't pay and the developer wins or the town continues the fight, loses and the developer still wins.

In the Glenway case in Newmarket, the legal, consulting and OMB costs were about \$750,000. More if you factor in staff time and community meetings.

Newmarket Council did not consider buying the land, which was the only real way to stop the development.

As I understand it, there were two different OMB issues. The town lost arguing the principles of development in the first phase. They then negotiated without leverage in the second phase to save costs. The end result was more homes approved than were in the developers' initial proposal. There were concessions related to schools, parks and trails.

As someone who has been developing various types of power projects across Canada and the United States (natural gas, land fill gas, and wind) as well as the transmission lines and natural gas pipelines associated with these power projects, I see a parallel. Just as the province is ultimately responsible for seeing that the lights stay on in the province, they are also responsible for ensuring that we have adequate types of dwellings to meet our population targets.

The province has now put in place regional committees to dealing with electricity planning so that a coordinated approach can be made to ensure that communities have adequate energy supply. This also means ensuring that communities understand the resulting trade-offs ? including cost - between alternatives, like having local generation or large local transmission lines.

The Places To Grow Legislation that the former McGuinty government put in place in 2005 ascribed intensification targets for our towns and cities.

This makes sense as we need to accommodate further population growth.

But what I find different about this situation is that Aurora, from what I can tell, is meeting its mandated interim intensification

targets and Highland Gate is a mature community.

If I am right, and the town is meeting these targets, then they, as their locally elected officials, should have ultimate say over zoning and planning within Aurora.

I am not sure if the OMB should be scrapped, as some have called for, but serious reforms are required. This administrative body cannot continue to run roughshod over communities and their elected officials around this province.

I am interested to see how this issue plays out in the run up to the next provincial election.

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