

Growth issues dominate Council's first look at Official Plan review

Aurora has experienced significant growth over the last 10 years, and targeting the right places for growth in the decades ahead will be a significant part of the discussion as the Town continues developing its blueprint through 2051.

Council last week took their first sweep of findings from the initial phase of the Town's Official Plan (OP) Review.

Once complete, the new OP will act as a guide for the community's growth and development over the next three decades and these issues were already in the forefront at last Tuesday's Public Planning meeting.

Helping to kick off the discussion was Councillor Michael Thompson who said that while Aurora's current population stands at approximately 63,000 people, Provincial growth targets estimate this population to swell to over 80,000 by 2041.

As public engagement on the revised OP continues, he asked whether residents and stakeholders were asked to give the impact of this growth serious consideration.

"When you're doing this process of engaging residents and other stakeholders, are you identifying to them that growth will happen and asking them to identify where or what areas within Aurora they see that growth or development happening?" he asked. "In reality, we don't have a lot of empty lots left to build upon and a lot of it is going to be intensification or infill. I would be curious to get the public's input on if they had to place another 16,000 residents, where they see those residents going on a map of Aurora?"

From the perspective of WSP's Sabrina Coletti, one of the consultants leading the public engagement process, it is "critically important to be completely honest and transparent" when engaging residents about what the OP review process entails.

Among the issues tackled with those who have provided input so far include opportunities for "minor intensification" within existing residential areas, intensification around Major Transit Station Areas (MTSAs) "the Wellington Street GO Station, in Aurora's case" and the development of a variety of housing types.

"We talked about things such as live-work units and where that might be appropriate, where mixed-use buildings might be appropriate, and various other housing forms, [and] what the needs are when it comes to public realm within the MTSA to ensure more of a community is designed and created around the MTSA and how the OP can support that," said Ms. Coletti.

Growth was also a concern from Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who asked whether there would be any movement away from "car-centric" planning towards something more inclusive, "complete communities", as well as whether accommodations would be considered for what she described as "the missing middle."

"You can require a certain amount of housing to be affordable, but that is just in your Major Transit Station Area," said consultant Paul Lowes. "This is a new tool that we can look at as part of the Official Plan. Other than that, it is tough to set out amounts of affordable housing."

Mayor Tom Mrakas also spoke to the issue of "complete communities," citing a proposal for development in Aurora's northeast quadrant near Leslie and St. John's Sideroad as an example "a 15-minute community" where many amenities are available within a quarter-hour radius of your home.

"We spoke about the public health benefits [of 15-minute communities] because I think it is important especially as we see this happening with the pandemic, people are moving away, they want more from their surrounding community, they don't just want to live in an 800 square foot box, go up, watch TV, go to sleep, go back down and get in their car and drive away, come back and do the same thing. They want to be able to be within a community and I think that speaks volumes on what a complete community is and the fact it does impact your health," said Mayor Mrakas.

?The other aspect of it that I think everyone needs to remember is the other thing that impacts health of residents in our community is over-development as well. When you over-develop an area, you get the same type of impacts on your health. So, we need to be careful how we do this. I know we're going to do a great job working with the consultants, the public and come up with a vision that speaks to what Aurora is and what Aurora will be in the future. I am looking forward to continuing the work and having those discussions with the public and with the consultants and staff, and we'll have a new official plan in 2022.?

Similarly, Councillor Harold Kim sought assurances that whatever is ultimately brought forward by the estimated completion date of the revised OP by 2022 provides a degree of flexibility.

?How do we go about developing an Official Plan so it allows the flexibility that the Province originally intended and, at the same time, balances and gives municipalities a certain level of control so that we can shape the municipality and development in a way that we envision it without having to have all these [Official Plan] amendments?? he asked.

Consultants replied that devising an OP that will not spark amendment requests was not something they could guarantee as every landowner has the right to file an OP amendment,? said Lowes. ?However, they said the best way to approach this issue is set out ?high level strategic direction.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter