

Mayor moves to oppose Bill, citing concerns over land protection

By Brock Weir

Mayor Tom Mrakas says he will call on Council this week to formally reject Ontario's Bill 66, informally known as the Open for Business Act, which could call into question the future of protected lands across the Province.

He made the pledge last week following remarks made in Open Forum ahead of last week's General Committee meeting by Aurora resident Susan Walmer, Chair of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust.

The Open for Business Act, formally known as the Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act, 2018, is touted by the Provincial Government as a bill that will 'stimulate business investment, create good jobs, and make Ontario more competitive by cutting unnecessary regulations that are inefficient, inflexible or out of date.'

The Bill includes giving municipalities such as Aurora a 'new economic tool' that would remove planning barriers to 'expedite major business investments and speed up approvals by two years.'

'The Government is proposing to make changes to the Planning Act to create a new economic development tool, the open-for-business planning

by-law,' said the Province. 'The tool would be available to all local municipalities, if certain prescribed criteria are met, to ensure that they can act quickly to attract businesses seeking development sites.

'A municipality's request to use an open-for-business planning bylaw would need to be accompanied by information that would be prescribed in a proposed new regulation, such as a description for subject lands, land use planning information, and open-for-business information, including details about the proposed employment opportunity.'

Opponents of the measures, however, say the new legislation could open up lands for potential development that are currently protected under a number of pieces of legislation including the Greenbelt Act and the Lake Simcoe Protection Act.

This is something Mayor Mrakas says Aurora is not interested in.

'There has been a great deal of discussion and concern surrounding the recently proposed Provincial Bill 66,' said Mayor Mrakas, echoing comments he made at the Council table last Tuesday. 'I am greatly concerned about the implications of the new 'open for business' legislation, in particular as it speaks to potential impacts to the integrity of the Greenbelt. I personally would not be in favour of entering discussions with the Province regarding the potential removal of any Town lands that are currently protected areas and would oppose any such move.

'Our Official Plan (OP) reflects our community's collective vision for current and future planning. And, as such, the OP clearly designates land that is protected. It also provides clearly designed land to meet future employment needs in the long term. We have no need to 'discuss' the option of removing designated lands from protected areas. Aurora is about smart growth and appropriate development within our community and there is nothing smart about allowing development to occur on protected lands in Aurora.' Ms. Walmer called on Council last week to speak out against Bill 66 and pass a motion letting the Province know 'strongly' that Aurora is a community that respects provincial legislation acts that protect land, water and air, and has no intention of requesting the bylaw.

'Bill 66 gives municipalities the power to override existing legislation that the government sees as impeding economic development that supports jobs through an Open for Business bylaw without conforming to the Clean Water Act, which was adopted after the Walkerton Tragedy, without conforming to the Oak Ridges Moraine Act, without conforming to the Green Belt Act, the Lake Simcoe Protection Act, the Places to Grow Act,' said Ms. Walmer, as former Provincial Environment Minister Chris Ballard looked on. 'Most of the legislation they are rolling back is in place to protect the health and safety of the people of Ontario and will allow municipalities to pass a bylaw to place employment uses and secondary uses such as residential and commercial anywhere in Ontario, and to do so without notifying the public.

'Many of you ' Mayor Mrakas, Wendy Gaertner, John Gallo, and Rachel Gilliland ' were elected on platforms of transparency, open engagement of the public, in setting priorities and involvement in Council's decision-making process. Rachel, I really liked your comment, 'transparency is because the public deserves to know.' These Open for Business bylaws are intended to fast track development proposals that are primarily, but not limited to, employment uses. But the bar is very low.

'A development application needs only to provide for 50 jobs in order to apply for the use of the bylaw in most of the province. Having provided for jobs, the development application can then include industrial, residential and commercial uses. Since development applications included under the open for business bylaw sidestep public consultation and all of the environmental regulations listed above, it can lead to land uses that contaminate our water and destroy our protected green spaces. Don't let this

happen in Aurora.?

All Council members, she said, need to stand up to protect green space and help address climate change for the benefit of future generations. Employment lands can be found elsewhere, she added.

?The Green Belt and Ontario's natural heritage are our strongest assets for growing food, preventing flooding, ensuring clean water and providing habitat for wildlife,? Ms. Walmer concluded. ?Bill 66 rolls back critical environmental legislations. Please continue to stand up for 30 years of environmental action, help the community, and be the first municipality to pass a motion to let the Province know that Aurora Council will not enact the bylaw Open for Business.?