

More time needed to weigh in on new Provincial growth targets, say Councillors

By Brock Weir

The Province needs to give municipalities like Aurora more time to review new growth targets for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, according to Council.

Local lawmakers are set to formally request an extension on commenting on proposed amendments to the Province's growth plan from 45 days, a deadline which would hit this Thursday, February 28, pushing the comment period to April 14.

This, they said, would allow them more time to consider significant changes when it comes to intensification and areas of designated business growth, and how it might impact Aurora.

The Growth Plan in question establishes minimum density targets within strategic growth areas, giving municipalities a frame work on how to make land use more efficient, reduce and control sprawl, and "cultivate a culture of conservation," according to a report to Council by planning staff.

Of particular concern to Aurora, they say, is a change in process on how lands currently designated as employment lands can be converted to non-employment uses, such as residential or recreational, and loosening the restrictions on a municipality doing so.

"The Province has identified 29 Significant Employment Zones and removed the Prime Employment Area Designation," say economic planners at the Town. "These 29 employment zones cannot be converted outside of a municipal comprehensive review (MCR) process. There are no Significant Employment Zones being proposed in Aurora; however, a municipality may make a request that the Province review and update provincially significant Employment Zones. In order to ensure the long-term protection of employment lands in Aurora, staff strongly support the designation of a Significant Employment Zone in the Highway 404 corridor."

Changes to intensification targets are also on Aurora's radar, particularly in greenfield areas.

"The 2017 Growth Plan introduced a significant increase to the minimum designated greenfield area density target, up to 80 residents and jobs per hectare " which would have had the effect of requiring new urban expansion areas to be planned for higher densities in order to compensate for the lower densities of the predominant lower densities already planned for in existing greenfield areas. The Province then revised the policy for municipalities (including those in York Region " leaving the target at 80 residents and jobs per hectare, but having it apply only to new urban expansion areas " much easier to manage and more achievable in the York Region context.

"The proposed new policy is a lower numerical target, but reverts back to being measured across the entire greenfield area " 60 residents and jobs per hectare. However, new urban expansion areas are still the only lands where future densities can be planned to achieve the greenfield target on average. Due to differing calculations, the proposed 60 residents and jobs per hectare over the entire greenfield area will likely not result in densities much different than the current 80 residents and jobs per hectare in new urban expansion areas."

The report was presented to Council members at the General Committee level, where the recommendations handed down by the Province received considerably mixed reviews. What elected members shared, however, was that staff need time well beyond the Provincial deadline to consider how the proposals might impact the Town.

"I am a little concerned that we're not being given much time," said Councillor Sandra Humfryes, noting she had specific concerns with greenfield density targets. "It sounds like we're going backwards."

She questioned if municipal staff had a "backup plan" to voice concerns if the Province does not agree to an extension. Doug Nadorozny, CAO for the Town, said that the report was written assuming that no extension would be given.

"If they don't give us that extension, there is probably little more we can do in a time frame [other than] what is in this report," he said. "All we can do is ask. Whether the Minister replies or not is in their hands."

Councillor Humfryes was not alone in her concerns. Calls for an extension were echoed by Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillor John Gallo.

Mayor Mrakas told Council an extension was also being eyed by the Region and he hoped more municipalities would come together to send a message to the Province that more time was needed.

"Where it talks about identifying strategic growth areas as preferred locations for intensification and that municipalities are directed to identify the appropriate type and scale of development in strategic growth areas and that we can identify those areas," he said. "I think that is a good thing because the Growth Plan basically takes precedence over the provincial policy statement and so, therefore, if we identify these areas, we'll stop getting these applications that are coming in and asking for intensification within the areas of

our municipality that we don't want to see that intensification occur and we can say no without fear of losing that battle.

?I am encouraged about that piece of it, but I would like to have a full look at the full scope of the changes and amendments that they are looking at presenting and have a full discussion with staff so we can put forward some good comments to the Province and make sure that we're heard.?

Added Councillor Gallo: ?I was so happy to see that in [the report] because I couldn't agree more that intensification should happen within public transportation corridors and that is where it should happen to avoid urban sprawl and all the other reasons. I was really happy to see that and I am hopeful that we can identify those and really promote them so that intensification can happen on the sites.?

Councillor Gallo also reiterated the importance of Aurora maintaining its employment land designations and not converting them to other uses, a view underscored by Councillor Wendy Gaertner.