

New Regional Official Plan raises environmental concerns

York Regional Council last week adopted its proposed new Regional Plan, a blueprint for area growth through 2051.

Designed to meet growth targets set by the Province, it will account for more than two million more residents of York Region over the next three decades.

The new Official Plan (OP) updates policies on building complete communities, promoting affordable housing, and designating employment lands.

"We are very proud to put forward a new Regional Official Plan," said Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson in a statement. "We could not have accomplished this significant milestone without the support of our municipal partners, stakeholders and the public who participated throughout the process. Current and future York Region residents and businesses are at the forefront as we plan our neighbourhoods and communities. Engagement with all stakeholders has been vital to the process to ensure existing needs are met, while planning to accommodate future growth."

While Regional Council approved the proposed OP, which has been submitted to the Province for final approval, it was not a unanimous decision with Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas joining his counterparts in Newmarket, King and Georgina voting against the plan.

"I voted against it because I was wearing my Regional hat and some of the amendments that were put forward at the last minute looked at expanding the urban boundaries to include some of the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt land – some which would be in Vaughan and Stouffville – and, to me, that is unacceptable and shouldn't be allowed," said Mayor Mrakas, noting that, in his view, the Regional OP will have little impact on Aurora itself when compared to surrounding communities.

"There was a bit of a procedural process issue that came up at the last meeting, that I disagreed with how it was handled, but ultimately you go with what the Clerk and the Chair say is the correct way to continue moving forward. You respect the decision and you move forward even though you disagree with it. Ultimately, you have a dozen-plus amendments that were put forward at the last minute and when you look at it, you say, "While I agree with quite a bit of the overall plan moving forward there's just too much there from an environmental perspective that is not the right thing to do for all of our communities. The amendments just don't grow our communities in a responsible or appropriate way. Ultimately, it will destroy our communities. It's something I feel very strongly and I know some of my colleagues felt just as strongly about it as well and we needed to vote the entire plan down because of that."

Advocacy organizations Environmental Defence and Stop Sprawl York Region also stated their opposition to the plan including parts of the Moraine and Greenbelt.

"After a complex series of last-minute motions and closed-door sessions last Thursday that made it difficult for Councillors – let alone residents – to discern what was being debated, York Region appears to have presented Minister of Municipal Affairs Steve Clark with an unlawful OP that purports to mark four protected Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt properties for destruction. No other municipal government has done this since the Greenbelt was created in 2005.

"Municipal governments do not have the power to remove protections from Greenbelt and Oak Ridges Moraine land. However, the surprise move seems calculated to entice the Minister into approving York Region's Official Plan and using provincial powers to remove Greenbelt protection. This would break the provincial government's clear and oft-repeated promise that it "won't touch the Greenbelt, we won't build on the Greenbelt."

Added Irene Ford of Stop Sprawl York Region in a statement: "All of it is beyond what York Region needs to meet the population and employment minimums mandated by the province. Will the province approve an Official Plan that was endorsed in a way that makes a joke of York Region's procedure bylaw, possibly their code of conduct, is not in provincial conformity, and can't be

endorsed by York Region professional planners??

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