

No one-size-fits-all approach on golf course redevelopment, says Premier



By Brock Weir

Golf course redevelopment is not an issue that is unique to Aurora and, when dealing with the issue, there just isn't a one-size-fits-all approach, says Premier Kathleen Wynne.

Premier Wynne visited Newmarket-Aurora on Friday afternoon for a roundtable with Newmarket students at Huron Heights Secondary School on the Province's Ontario Student Grant.

Announced in the 2016 Budget, the program will overhaul several existing provincial grant programs by the 2017-2018 school year to make post-secondary education free for eligible students in families with an annual income of \$83,300 or less.

The students presented Premier Wynne with a number of hard-hitting questions about how this will affect them, impact students preparing to go to university for the 2016-2017 school year, as well as pressing Premier Wynne for support for young adults grappling with the suicide epidemic in First Nations, particularly Attawapiskat.

"Students always ask the best questions," said Premier Wynne, sitting down with The Auroran following the roundtable for a wide-ranging interview. "My experience going to debates during election campaigns or discussions with students is they cut right to the chase. They are just fantastic."

Cutting to the chase, the discussion shifted to issues immediately before Aurora, including calls from residents and local politicians to reform the Ontario Municipal Board, balancing infill projects mandated under Ontario's Places to Grow Legislation with the needs of existing communities, and reforms at the Regional Level.

Recent movement around the Aurora Council Table from Councillors Michael Thompson and Tom Mrakas has led to an expansive summit planned in the City of Markham next month on reforming the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB). Premier Wynne said she understood the issue of golf courses, which was at the initial core of this summit is an issue being tackled by municipal councillors, but it is up to municipalities to chart the course forward.

"I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all provincial mandate that should come down around golf courses," she said. "I think

municipalities need to work with those owners to figure out a way forward. A good town plan has got green space built into it. It has those planning features already in place, but I don't think you can really ask that process to take the place of good planning for green space in a Town.?

This was a view shared by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard, who joined in the interview.

?My concern is always around infill where towns already have very good secondary plans that address the Places to Grow legislation,? he said. ?I don't think I am hearing [from] the community around the golf course that there should be no infill. It is density and location, and that has always been my concern; is it keeping in with the Town's really well-done secondary plan? That is my concern, but as it is in front of the OMB we are a little reticent to say more than that.?

Reticent or not, if municipal politicians from around southern Ontario have their way, there will be plenty more to say in the coming weeks.

On the subject of reform at the OMB, Premier Wynne said while the Liberal Government has already made ?significant changes? as to what can be heard at the OMB, including timelines, there is ?a need for another round of review and we are going to undertake that.?

?My concern is we have the decisions made around land use planning at the right level of government and in the right places,? said Premier Wynne. ?We want city councils to be empowered and make good planning decisions and to be able to control the things they should be controlling. For example, there is a large percentage of minor variances that still go to the OMB and I don't think that should happen.

?I think we should find a way to have those very local decisions, when they are very local decisions, made at the Council level. When there are broader, more systemic issues where there is a Provincial interest, then I think those are the things that should go to the OMB and we haven't quite got that balance yet and that is what we'll be looking for.?

She is not in favour, she added, of abolishing the OMB and that is an option that is off the table as far as the Government is concerned, but there is room for improvement.

?I think we need to define better the decisions that should be made at the local level and the decisions that should go to the OMB. For that, we need Councils to really take responsibility for planning decisions. What I think shouldn't happen is decisions [being] referred to the OMB because Councils don't want to make those decisions. That is the worst kind of planning process, from my perspective. Since before I got into government, and I was elected in 2003, before that I was already working in my community with advocates and folks who want to make sure the OMB was making decisions that were good for neighbourhoods, but that presupposes that city councils take responsibility for planning decisions.?

As for the Regional Chair decision? Stay tuned.

When Mr. Ballard's legislation came before the Ontario Legislature and, in turn, hit the Regional Council table over the winter, many area representatives at the Region called foul, questioning why the legislation was specifically ?targeting? York Region.

Now, that decision is in the hands of Queen's Park.

?Those decisions have been left for the Region to determine,? said Premier Wynne. ?In Durham, there is an elected chair because there was a decision to do that. It is obviously an issue that has been raised. I met with the Chairs and the Mayors in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. It is an issue that has been raised, and I know there are some issues that are being discussed in light of the municipal elections act. We are looking at the recommendations, no decisions have been made, and we are bringing legislation forward in the fall.?