

Number of cannabis retail stores in Aurora should be capped, Councillor contends

Retailers looking to open up new cannabis stores in Aurora could see their dreams go up in smoke if Council gets its way.

Last week, Council greenlit a motion from Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim calling on the Provincial Government and its Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) to 'no longer accept any further cannabis retail applications for the Town of Aurora' and put a cap on how many such stores are allowed in a municipality.

Councillor Kim, who opposed Aurora 'opting in' to retail cannabis sales in January of 2019 said with a geographic area of 7 km by 7 km and a population of 64,000, the 13 existing cannabis stores in Aurora are more than enough.

'I voted against this because I did not feel the need to be the first municipality in the area to approve. Why? My concern was if we were one of the first to allow retail cannabis stores, we would get more than our fair share of cannabis stores and, sure enough, that's what has transpired,' he said. 'On this current day, Newmarket, Richmond Hill, Vaughan and others have still not approved. Therefore, it is no surprise that cannabis entrepreneurs have flocked to Aurora.'

The Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville is the only other York Region municipality to similarly opt-in to retail cannabis sales, but this was not mentioned during the debate.

'Some have suggested to me, 'Why don't you let the free-market system work? If we have too many stores, some will go bankrupt and attrition will happen.' Yes, I agree. However, in the meantime, we're not playing in an equitable playing field. Supply and demand is skewed because we are one of the few islands of free enterprise for cannabis. Limited geography is delaying the natural evolution of the free-market system, which will bring attrition, eventually. In the meantime, Aurora residents suffer the consequence of streetscapes being littered with cannabis stores.'

While Aurora does not grant permits for such stores 'that falls under the purview of the AGCO' he said the Province, despite us 'living in a free-market country', should set a cap because the precedent is already there in limiting the number of grocery stores that can sell beer, wine and cider.

'This motion is not just for the potential benefit of Aurora, but hopefully other municipalities,' said Councillor Kim. 'Having policies in place so they don't get the deluge and intensification that Aurora has experienced in two-and-a-half short years.'

Councillors were largely in favour of the motion, with Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland stating that 'a lot of us really didn't understand that we were going to blow up the way that we did.'

'We have had lots of reports coming back asking how many we've got,' she said. 'It has proven a little bit of a nuisance.'

One concern expressed by Councillor Gilliland was funding related to opting in.

Funding was to be provided by the Province to municipalities opting in to address some of the challenges that would come with retail cannabis, including bylaw enforcement and education.

Aurora's Director of Finance Rachel Wainwright-van Kessel said the Town received funding 'early on' in the program but that money has since been spent and they're not expecting any additional funding at this time.

'I would like to see the Province step up and give us a little extra funding to address some of the extra servicing we need to be doing, such as bylaw and York Regional Police because there are certain things in their jurisdiction that they can respond to,' said Councillor Gilliland.

Also supportive was Mayor Tom Mrakas who said Council has talked about this long and hard about the fact the Province might have made a mistake.

Many municipalities have been talking about this, he said. I know many of my mayoral colleagues have been having conversations around the table; I know it was a big discussion at the Small Urban Mayors meetings and in regards to this we brought this up not only to the Premier but also the Prime Minister that the impacts this is having on our communities yes, it might be a legal product, but stores are just popping up like crazy. There should be a cap on it and hopefully the Province will [make] the necessary changes that will see some type of cap come in.

The motion passed unanimously.

HAVE YOUR SAY Does Aurora have too many retail cannabis stores? Should the Province place a cap on retail stores or should the free-market decide? Send your thoughts to brock@lpcmedia.ca.

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter