

Oak Ridges Moraine review could provide opportunities as Council wants more time to weigh in

By Brock Weir

Loosening some restrictions on existing Oak Ridges Moraine legislation could provide opportunities for Aurora, according to municipal staff and some members of Council, but more time is needed to properly weigh in on potential changes, they say.

Council is considering a number of comments to send to the Province of Ontario this week, answering the call to municipalities to throw in their two cents on the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.

These reports were before Council for the first time at the Committee level last week, and they were based on recommendations not just from municipal staff, but also comments gathered through a public information session held in Aurora last month.

Recommendations from staff include providing greater flexibility for land severance and lands currently designated 'countryside' under current legislation as long as there is 'no adverse impact on any natural heritage or hydrogeological features.' Residents, on the other hand, opined there should be no further development permitted on the Moraine, a counterpoint to the municipality's request for flexibility on land severance and countryside designation, and an increased emphasis on conservation.

Speaking to the issue of the 'countryside' designation last week, Mayor Geoff Dawe said this flexibility from the Province would, in turn, provide greater flexibility and opportunities to the Town, specifically in lands south of Leslie and Wellington currently under this designation.

'If the Town had the opportunity to look at those lands and maybe put in a soccer field with change room facilities, as an example, it would allow us to deal with [a shortage of soccer fields] much more cost effectively and we can be pretty sure that whatever we do would be very much in keeping with the highest level of construction,' he said. 'We could not do it because of the countryside regulations. We don't want to open it up holus-bolus, but I think there needs to be more flexibility on the whole concept of what you can and cannot do, and it is very cut and dry.'

Residents would also benefit, he added, in that landowners would be able to do small scale development, such as a small shed, without having to 'jump through hoops' in order to get that done.

Councillor John Abel said he agreed with the Mayor's assessment.

'It would be very good for our community and would not have an impact on the Oak Ridges Moraine, which is a very sensitive area,' he said.

Added Councillor Jeff Thom: 'The greater flexibility is great, but if you trade that flexibility with protecting the environment, I will probably stick with the regulations in place every single time.'

This concern was one echoed by other Councillors, including Councillor Harold Kim who said many of the recommendations before Council from staff were 'based on more flexibility or language being too restrictive' with few recommendations with respect to the environment.

Comments from Municipalities to the Province are due in Toronto by this Thursday, May 28, but some Councillors said this wasn't enough time to adequately consider the points before them. Councillor Paul Pirri, for instance, said he would have a difficult time coming into this week's Council meeting with enough information, requesting further reports to come back to Council on what is changed and with further defined comments.

'The difficulty in preparing a report like this is trying to develop a consensus when there is nothing to react to,' said Aurora CAO Neil Garbe, suggesting another avenue to Council would be to forward public comments to the Province and then wait for Council to

respond to ?whatever the Province puts forward.?

For Councillor Wendy Gaertner, last month's public consultation session was not enough. It was held, she said, on a night already taken up by budget deliberations, making it difficult for Councillors to be in two places at once, and it is their ?responsibility? to hear the public's concerns firsthand.

?I am not worried about someone putting a shed on their land,? she said. I am worried about the possibility of someone putting a residential development on land which shouldn't be developed residentially. I want us to be responsible, I want us to be prudent, and I don't want to do anything that would put us on a slippery slope in Aurora."