

Ontario Bill backtracks on OMB reform: Mayor

By Brock Weir

A new bill introduced into the Ontario Legislature in the name of creating more housing will take away the ability of communities like Aurora to have a say in planning decisions, according to Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Mayor Mrakas was joined Monday in Toronto by several colleagues from across the GTA to speak out against the Provincial Government's 'Housing Supply Action Plan' which is aimed at 'cutting red tape, building more housing and increasing the number of affordable homes.'

The plan was announced Thursday by Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, who said people struggling to find affordable housing 'that fits their family budget will see real relief and real choices' thanks to the changes outlined in the changes.

'We've heard loud and clear from families across Ontario that finding housing that is affordable takes too long and costs too much,' said Clark. 'After years of neglect by the former government, there is now a housing crisis in Ontario and the dream of ownership is out of reach for too many. Our plan will make it easier to build the right type of homes in the right places, giving Ontarians and their families more flexibility when looking for a home they can afford.'

Thursday's announcement said that the Plan would 'streamline the overly complex development approvals process to remove unnecessary duplication and barriers, making costs and timelines more predictable,' focusing on five key themes of speed, cost, mix, rent and innovation.

Mayor Mrakas, however, said the changes give Local Planning Appeal Tribunals, set up under the previous Provincial government, much of the same powers previously enjoyed by former Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), and put communities' abilities to make planning decisions that suit local needs in jeopardy.

'I was shocked, and I couldn't believe that we're going backwards instead of forwards,' said Mayor Mrakas, who chaired the OMB Reform Group, on his initial thoughts following the announcement. 'Normally, when you make changes to policy or legislation, we need to have a certain amount of time to see how it unfolds, how it works, how it is going to be working, and when you re-evaluate it, you don't just kind of throw it out and go backwards and back to the old system. You look to see how you can make some minor changes to keep it moving forward.'

'The changes to the OMB in the House was a unanimous decision, so every party voted in favour of making changes to the OMB. They all understood there was a need to make changes to

that piece of legislation, so now to go back to something that people unanimously supported moving forward with really doesn't make any sense.?

Going back to the old system will see local Councils elected by the people to make decisions on behalf of constituents ?on how we grow taken out of our hand and an unelected, unaccountable body, in turn, is going to be deciding how the Town of Aurora will grow, how it will intensify, how much density will occur, regardless of how we see our Town evolving.?

At the local level, Mayor Mrakas said he was particularly concerned about the impacts such a move would have on efforts to put in place changes to protect Aurora's so-called Stable Neighbourhoods against incompatible development, as well as efforts to preserve local heritage.

?I am glad we're moving ahead with changes to the zoning in regards to stable neighbourhoods and we're at the point where it is going to be in front of General Committee (in early June), so we can get it in front of Council and ratify those changes,? he said. ?If we don't implement the changes we're looking at doing, and this became law, then through the appeal process, that appeal of our changes to the zoning would end up going to the new, but the old OMB system which means that chances are they would be unfavourable to the Town's new changes.?

Additionally under the proposed changes, matters related to heritage designations, or any appeals under that banner, could go before the Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT) instead of the current system where matters appear before the Conservation Review Board.

?LPAT's decisions are binding, whereas the Conservation Review Board's decisions are not binding, said Mayor Mrakas. ?Normally, in the infinite wisdom of the Province, they have the authority when it came to heritage matters to the local municipality. We had the ultimate authority. With this change, now you've almost reversed it and now you're giving the authority, once again, to that unelected, unaccountable body and they will be deciding what is historic in our Town.

?To me, that is absolutely wrong and could have long-lasting ramifications to the heritage in our community.?