POLITICS AS USUAL: Places to Grow

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

In April 2013, I wrote a column that I think is relevant again.
I wrote about then MPP Frank Klees' Private Members Bill, ?Protecting Existing Communities?. This Bill sought to address municipal planning issues around intensification and the need for municipal control of same.
The now-dead Bill posited that the Places to Grow Act should be amended to afford municipalities the right to protect municipal planning decisions ? specifically municipal Official Plans ? as they speak to stable residential areas and parks and open spaces.
In other words, municipalities should be able to say ?no? to huge developments that do not fit their approved Official Plans, regardless of whether these developments allegedly fit under the Places to Grow Act.
The impetus for the Bill was the Glenway golf course development in Newmarket. The proposed ? and now ?approved? ? development irrevocably altered a stable existing community by plunking down a 700-plus housing development in the middle of the now defunct fairways.
The Town of Newmarket fought that development all the way through the OMB but lost.
If former MPP Klees' Bill had passed, perhaps it would have had an impact on the Glenway decision; perhaps not. Some have argued that there were problems with the proposed Bill (the ill-defined term ?municipal interest? was especially problematic) that would have rendered it ineffectual.
Regardless of the language, problematic or not, the central argument or purpose of the Bill is one that should be supported, in my opinion. I agree that should a development proposal go to the OMB, then the OMB should recognize or at least consider that municipal Official Plans should take precedence in planning decisions when they speak to established neighbourhoods and parks.
Municipalities are required to have an Official Plan.
The OPs have to meet all sorts of stringent criteria in order to be approved. Once enacted, they are supposed to be the law of the land in the planning sense. If you want to build something, it has to meet the Plan. If it doesn't meet the Plan, they you are going to have to go to Council to get approval for an amendment to the Plan.
It stands to reason then that you'd have to make a pretty strong case to alter a Town's OP.
And yet, municipalities across the province - Aurora, Newmarket, Richmond Hill ? have all faced, or are facing the same issue: green spaces (parks, golf courses, observatories) under threat from development through amendment requests to the OP.
These amendment requests are often approved simply because a municipality does not want, or cannot afford, a battle at the OMB.
As a consequence, municipal community building and community preserving plans go out the window.
The Places to Grow Act and other provincial planning legislation seem wonderful on paper; but down at the municipal level, there are significant problems with their implementation and their interpretation.
Municipalities are left to do the heavy lifting, while the Province and their representatives remain silent.
I think that when there are multiple battles around the same issue in multiple communities, for which competing interpretations of provincial planning legislation are the weapons being wielded, the province should weigh in. It's their legislation. Shouldn't they be required to at least provide some clarity on what it means?
Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is ? after all ? Our Town.