

POLITICS AS USUAL: Places to Grow

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

As anyone who has attended a planning meeting or even taken an interest in municipal planning writ large can well attest ? your local Council does not have the final say on how your community is planned, and how it will look and feel.

It can try, that's for sure, but ultimately, an external body, the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), has the final authority on many key planning decisions. Our MPP, Frank Klees, wants to change that. Mr. Klees has put forward an interesting Private Member's bill that could have potentially positive impacts on municipal planning. As of today's date it has already been tabled for first reading. To step back a bit, lest I be accused of political myopia, I am not saying provincial planning measures are not necessary. Clearly, if local self interest is the only concern in municipal planning, then broader community interests such as the preservation of farm land or water supply would suffer.

Provincial planning edicts impose measures that are designed ostensibly to protect important natural and built resources ? and the Ontario Municipal Board is often seen to be ?enforcing? (for lack of a better word) those edicts in the face of local planning committee decisions that go against the legislation.

However, legislation such as the Greenbelt or Places to Grow, sound wonderful on paper, but the devil is truly in the details ? and the details are rather unsettling for individual communities.

They impose community altering planning requirements that have detrimental effects on the very fibre of the community. Yes, we cannot sprawl out across the countryside forever. It is not prudent planning to continue to gobble up the farmland and overburden our transit systems.

But it is similarly not prudent planning to jam a 27 storey building in the middle of a community of bungalows and side splits in the name of ?intensification?.

We have seen a number of communities battle over the impacts of the ?intensification? requirements of the Places to Grow Act. Case in point, our dear neighbours to the north, Newmarket.

The Glenway development is a proposal to put approximately 700 houses or units where there used to be a golf course. All the residents that bought homes in the community, many of whom paid a premium to have their homes back onto a golf course are now in the position of not only losing the golf course, but having it replaced with row houses and similarly dense housing structures to the tune of 700 units!

I think we'd be up in arms too, if that happened in Aurora.

Mr. Klees takes aim at the issue by seeking to amend the Places to Grow Act. Specifically the Bill states, ?the Bill amends the Act to provide that certain municipal decisions rejecting development proposals that would involve intensification in the plan area are not subject to appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board. The new provision prevails over all other legislation.? I think his proposal is a good one, and one that should be supported across the communities of York Region ? an area arguably hardest hit by the intensification requirements of the Act.

Mr. Klees' Bill is not proposing broad sweeping planning powers for local municipalities, rather it seeks to limit the ability of those who challenge the decisions to use an external body ? the OMB ? to overrule the decisions. Quoting from the Bill, (section (2)) ?A decision made by a municipal council with respect to a part of the plan area is final and not subject to appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board if the following conditions are satisfied: 1. The decision is to refuse a request to amend the municipality's official plan with respect to land that is designated as one or both of the following: Stable Residential Area or Parks and Open space.? So in other words, you cannot come in and rip up a golf course community and replace it with town homes and condos squeezed in behind existing homes. I think that makes infinite sense.

The second criterion is an interesting one that I think will open up quite a bit of debate. The Bill states that an applicant cannot appeal a Council planning decision to the OMB, if ?the municipal council has passed a resolution stating that the requested official plan amendment would not be in the best interests of the residents of the municipality?.

On paper, that too makes infinite sense. Why can't a municipality decide what's in its best interest? Too many times our communities are forced to accept planning decisions that we simply don't want. Talk to Brampton, for example, about its stacked housing proposal in Springdale and about how divisive these kinds of issues can be.

I think Mr. Klees may have a fight on his hands about the second criteria ? debates about what constitutes a ?community interest? will undoubtedly go on and on. However, I think the first portion of his proposed Bill should be met with support. Why? Because it makes sense. Common sense.

What does not make sense is to rip up green space in the name of intensification. Councils should be able to say no to developments that seek to build infill housing on existing green spaces.

If they can't, well, what's to stop someone from saying, ?hmmmm, you have some green space in the middle of town that no one is using, why not put up some condos in the Town Park?? I am being facetious, obviously, but I don't think it is entirely outside the realm of possibility.

Local Councils need to regain some control over local planning decisions. Mr. Klees' Bill might just give them that. We shall see. Until next week, stay informed, stay involved, because this is after all, Our Town.