

Public could have one more chance to weigh in on Oak Ridges Moraine review

By Brock Weir

Members of the public could have one more chance to sound off on potential changes to the Oak Ridges Moraine Protection Plan later this month.

A further meeting will be considered by Council at the Committee level this week following discussions at the previous Council session outlining concerns neither Council nor the public had enough time to seriously consider potential changes not only to the Oak Ridges Moraine plan, but also plans related to the Greenbelt and the Niagara Escarpment, before the Province's set due date for comments at the end of May.

If a further meeting is called, it will be the second public session devoted to the plans. The initial meeting attracted 40 residents and although not a Council meeting, it was held the same night as budget deliberations keeping members of Council otherwise occupied from hearing firsthand what the public had to say on the subject.

'My concern is Council doesn't have enough information and evidence to be sure exactly what we are going to be endorsing with these comments,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, citing a number of recommendations placed by Council before staff as they relate to the legislation.

These include greater flexibility on land severance on Moraine lands and lands falling within the countryside designation within the Legislation, and changes with the minor variance process.

Councillor Gaertner said she had a number of questions on the recommendations, including their respective impacts on water quality, ongoing developments, and potential loopholes which might arise from tinkering with the plan as it stands now.

'My feeling was we didn't fully understand the lasting effect that sending these comments forward to the Province will have,' she said, calling for Council to hold back on submitting its recommendations before further consultation could take place. 'I don't believe this Council has enough information. I don't believe we understand the implications, and I don't believe we have examples of how these comments are going to affect the Moraine. Something as important as the protection of the moraine deserves our Council is fully informed and we have a fully consultative process with the public before we send in our comments to the Province.'

This viewpoint was supported by Councillor Paul Pirri, who suggested a meeting be held 'mid-June.'

'I would rather take a little bit more time to digest that information and bring in the comments from the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust and give ourselves the appropriate time to go over the documentation. I would have liked a little bit more time to ask some extra questions.'

Councillor Jeff Thom said he shared a number of the concerns outlined by Councillor Gaertner, but said it was important to look at the legislation in question from a wide perspective and not 'siloe'd into a box in Aurora' because these are ties that bind the community and the Province.

'Often I think the sense some people get when you start talking about the moraine and development is, 'the hippies are back again and it is just people who care about the environment and that's it,' but from a fiscally conservative point of view, the greenbelt, which includes the Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment provides the Province with 9.1 billion in economic benefits with around 161,000 full-time equivalent jobs,' he said. 'I do think it matters what municipalities say, both from public and from Council.'

The question remains, however, whether there will still be enough time to make submissions to the Province on the plans past the previously established deadline. Although Council decided to forge ahead with a Special Council meeting based on the view there was flexibility on the due date, further discussions following the meeting cast doubt on that. If a meeting is indeed called, Mayor

Dawe told The Auroran June 22 or June 29 are two possibilities being eyed.