

Roadmap to 2051 guided by housing, growth concerns

As Aurora continues the process of charting its course through 2051, the issues of affordable and attainable housing have risen to the top.

Last week, Council received an update on the ongoing review of the Town's Official Plan.

Mandated by the Province of Ontario to revise the Official Plan (OP), which currently serves as a blueprint for municipal growth through 2031, the new document once completed by a target date of the fall of 2022, will serve as a roadmap through to 2051.

"This whole exercise and endeavour is really important and necessary for the Town to lay out a path for the next 30 years from now," said David Riley of SGL Planning, one of two companies retained by the Town to carry out this process.

Public information sessions began taking place virtually earlier this fall to get input from residents on how they would like to see Aurora move and grow forward. According to Town Planner Edward Terry, some of the issues voiced by residents include a desire to maintain "a small-town charm" and growth directed at targeted areas, including around major transit stations.

Additional drivers voiced by residents, said Mr. Terry, include improved trails and connections, more parks, and an increased emphasis on environmental preservation.

"A lot has been done already and one of the big things that has been accomplished through early consultation [is] the refinement of the Official Plan's existing 12 fundamental principles and really turning that into what we call the four 'focus area' themes: growth and infrastructure, complete communities, natural heritage, and cultural heritage and archaeology," said Mr. Riley.

Earlier this year, consultants leading the OP review established the Community Stakeholder Committee, which brings together representatives from different community sectors, including representatives from the municipality and Council.

Together, they looked at gaps in the Town's existing OP, where priorities should be placed, and ways to facilitate outreach to the public.

Although they have not been able to have pop-up in-person engagement sessions due to the global pandemic, online engagement has, in the view of the consultants, been successful thus far, allowing for clear themes to emerge.

"We have certainly heard a lot that growth management and how the projected growth over the next 30 years will be managed and directed within the Town is certainly a priority," said Sabrina Colletti of WSP, whose team has been leading the public engagement. "Attainable housing, affordable housing, affordability and choice are absolutely themes that have been heard through Phase 1 and attainable housing really is a term we have used to represent housing choice at all ends of the spectrum and for all demographics. For professionals and young families as well as for seniors looking to age in place and downsize.

"The preservation of natural areas has always been a dominant theme and a priority within Aurora and certainly continues to be a priority within Aurora. The importance of sustainability and climate change has been communicated to us clearly and should be considered. We have heard through Official Plan policy. Then diversity and inclusion: policies that are representative of the diversity of the Town and that are inclusive and will encourage a range of choices and a diverse Town going forward is something we have heard pretty clearly."

Over the next few months, these themes will be explored by consultants in greater detail and their findings will form the basis of a series of "discussion papers" which will lead the next phase of consultation. Four open houses are planned in February and March to go over these findings and present draft outcomes for further discussion in the process.

?Phase 1 has been very important and has been a priority to us when it comes to raising awareness within the community and getting a sense of the vision for Aurora and where some of the gaps exist in the Official Plan,? said Ms. Colletti. ?The bulk of the engagement work will actually [go] through Phase 2 and this is where the basis of many of the policies that will find their way into the Official Plan will be formed.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter