

Six themes emerge in Official Plan review

Managing growth and creating complete communities will be among the six key pillars moving forward as the municipality continues its review of Aurora's Official Plan.

The Town is currently in the midst of reviewing its existing Official Plan (OP) and drafting revisions which will act as a blueprint for growth and development within the community through 2051.

Last week, consultants leading the study outlined the next steps in this review, including six key discussion papers that will steer future consultation. These six pillars include growth management, complete communities, natural heritage, transportation, cultural heritage, and policy gaps.

These six areas have been identified and expanded through a series of public open houses – both virtual and physical – as well as feedback received through online submissions.

“Something that was heard very clearly was that growth should be balanced with protection for natural spaces,” said consultant Sabrina Coletti at last week’s Public Planning meeting. “We also heard that growth should be representative of gentle density, there should be a maximum height permitted within the Town, but where those intensification areas exist within the Town a focus should be placed on providing a mix of housing typologies.”

The lack of affordable housing within Aurora was a theme that often rose to the top, complete with suggestions on how to incentivise its development, along with addressing traffic congestion and parking issues and these themes should be considered hand-in-hand with intensification – to ensure they are addressed and those issues aren’t created.”

“We heard very quickly that during the various meetings as well as in the lead-up to tonight’s meeting that residents of Aurora truly value their natural heritage features and natural spaces within the Town,” they said. “We also heard that connectivity between green spaces could be improved, as could access to those green spaces and education about preservation of natural areas. In relation to complete communities, we received quite a bit of feedback on complete streets in particular [including] accessibility and walkability within the Town. We heard a bit about those areas that were lacking in sidewalks that caused issues when it came to connectivity and we also received a lot of feedback about ensuring that active transportation is encouraged through the installation, for instance, of dedicated bike lanes.”

Discussion papers related to growth will outline how the Town will develop over the next 30 years, including employment growth. Consultants found that in accommodating population targets outlined by the Province, Aurora will be able to largely accommodate this growth through current development applications as well as intensification in the Town’s Major Transit Station Area (MTSC) in the vicinity of the GO Station. Active transportation opportunities will be considered here as well.

Natural heritage discussions include the potential to develop new policies and enhance existing policies around climate change, invasive species, environmental stewardship, woodland cover targets, and protecting natural features.

On Council’s first sweep of the discussion papers, several key themes rose to the top, including population growth and affordable housing.

On the first front, Councillor John Gallo noted that the Region’s Growth Management Plan has identified Aurora as having a population of 84,900 and 41,000 jobs by 2051. He questioned what would happen if Aurora said it didn’t agree with the figures handed down by the Province and allocated to Aurora by the Region.

While those numbers are expected to come under closer scrutiny by Council this week, Town Planner David Waters said Council can always move for less people and less jobs, but that could be challenged at the Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT).

‘It is really up to Council in terms of what number they feel comfortable with in terms of growth forecasts,’ said Mr. Waters. ‘However, the Region has done a very thorough job in estimating the share for Aurora and in consideration of other municipalities as well.’ At the beginning of this process, the Province gave them a gross number and it was up to the Region to distribute it to the nine area municipalities.’

From the perspective of Councillor Gallo, Council should have a say in what Aurora would like to see by 2051. It might align with the Region, it might not, but he said it was hard to say whether those numbers were right or wrong.

A similar perspective was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson who said that once the numbers are determined discussions should then be had on how and where to accommodate the influx of new residents.

‘Once Council is in agreement on where those areas of growth are, everything else is influenced by that decision with regards to the preservation and maintenance of natural heritage areas, or in regards to the tree canopy, or any of those other items. I do think we could spend a little more time on that forecast.’

How ever the population grows, Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she wanted further options on how incoming builders, as well as those looking at potential infill projects, can be incentivised to provide affordable housing options.

Mr. Riley said there are different ways this can be accomplished.

‘The City of Toronto has some policies with respect to, for example, rental housing and if you’re proposing a development where there might be existing rental housing ? a building of six or more units ? the City has the ability to ask for ways to secure affordable rents on what you’re building?’ and also have improvements for the existing rental housing that is there.’

Councillor Wendy Gaertner was also focused on affordable housing, turning her attention to rebuilds in Aurora’s ‘stable neighbourhoods’ which have not accounted for lost secondary suites and basement apartments that were part of the ‘old’ housing stock.

‘I would like to see opportunities for duplexes and fourplexes, perhaps at the fringe of the Stable Neighbourhood areas,’ she said. ‘I think that addresses some more affordable family housing and I think it is very appropriate because it is on the transit corridor.’

At the end of the day, however, Mayor Tom Mrakas noted that the OP is ‘probably the most important’ planning document in the Town’s arsenal and it will take ‘extensive work’ to go through it and strike the right balance.

‘If you don’t put the proper policies in place, then what you do is you open yourself up as a municipality to overdevelopment, for abuse of our environment, destruction of our heritage?whether it is lands or properties, and not being able to move forward with that vision we want to create as a community, and ultimately that is what we’re trying to achieve here,’ he said.

‘That is why it is imperative that we get this right and have the proper public engagement, have everyone contribute to this and develop a vision for our community so we continue to keep the character of our community, grow and evolve’ which is more pedestrian friendly area, more walkability, more affordability. These are the things we’re trying to achieve and we can do all of this and still maintain a lot of the character that we, as Aurorans, expect when we look at development within our community ? especially when you look at the growth.’

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter