

Some Council members say Housing Pledge is a step in the right direction to address crisis

Aurora's contentious Housing Pledge was approved on a vote of 4 ? 3 last week, with lawmakers in favour of the plan stating accelerating and setting housing targets at 8,000 new units by 2031 as a step in the right direction for people in need.

First around the table to voice their support for the Housing Pledge last week was Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said while she opposed Strong Mayor powers being granted to Aurora as part of the Province's directive on the Housing Pledge, something needed to be done to ensure there are enough housing units to go around.

'Kids, young adults, students, [are] looking to live in a van in a parking spot just to go to a secondary school or renting a space on the living room floor just so they have a place to sleep,' she said. 'We can't be doing this, but we can try to fix this by building some new homes like we did in the 80s, giving more choices and more attainable and affordable choices. This is the first step we can do as a municipality.'

'We can be part of the solution by supporting the Province in building more attainable and mixed housing choices and purpose-built rentals. I want to see some of that in this Town and identify some of the most appropriate spaces we have. We also have some of that space. While this housing pledge gives us a target to commit to, it also gives Provincial monetary incentives to help with the much-needed infrastructure to support it'. I am happy there is some money on the table that is going to [allow this from the Province], I understand some people had concerns with that, but it is there and I think the Province is trying to work with municipalities to ease some of that pressure and say, 'What can we do to help?' This is one of those tools.'

Next in supporting the pledge was Mayor Tom Mrakas, who made public his commitment to the housing pledge to Ontario's Minister of Housing & Municipal Affairs on September 15.

Addressing concerns expressed by opposing Council members that 8,000 housing pledges by 2031 accelerates the 2051 housing target contained within Aurora's new draft Official Plan by two decades, Mayor Mrakas said there is increased pressure from the Ontario Government.

'I have always been very big on the fact that we need to conform to our Official Plan (OP),' he said. 'Anyone who comes in here and looks to develop needs to conform to our OP to the best of their ability and it needs to be in the interests of the way we want to see our community grow. That is not going to change'. But there is pressure from the Province. We're going to see them possibly make some changes, but we're trying to sit down with them and say that we can achieve this pledge.'

It was, he said, a matter of 'shifting and accelerating' but insisted building up to meet those goals with 12-storey and 15-storey buildings is a 'no go' as far as he was concerned.

'If someone is going to come in here and use the excuse that 'we're putting this forward because we're going to help you meet your pledge of 8,000 units.' That is not why we're pledging 8,000 units. We're pledging 8,000 units because we agree that there is a housing crisis, that we need to accelerate growth, that we need to increase supply and that we're willing to do our part as the Town of Aurora and stand with the other municipalities that have pledged to do their part and we're going to do that ' but we want it to be done Aurora's way. That is always the way it is going to be. That is always the way we're going to do it at this table. We're all going to work together to make sure we continue to do everything that is in the best interests of our community because that is what we do here.'

Addressing some of the concerns brought up by other Council members on just what constitutes 'affordable' in the context of 'affordable housing' in 2023, the Mayor said he 'challenged every resident to ask every Council member for their definition of 'affordable.''

'Is it market value or is it below market value?' he said, adding if it was below market value it would be considered 'subsidized housing' and that would be a tax question.

'To continuously throw around the word 'affordable' without giving a meaning to it is a false narrative being perpetuated by every elected official across this Province,' he said.

A similar sentiment was offered by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim who said, 'many politicians at all levels use that term for political purposes because there is no such thing as affordable housing and there won't be affordable housing for probably a couple of generations.'

'If people are really serious about affordable housing, what do you do at the Federal level, Provincial level, you put a capital gains tax on all housing types effective immediately. I can certainly tell you that housing will be more affordable tomorrow. If there is a political will and all the politicians who cry about affordable housing truly wants that, they should advocate for that and vote for that and housing will be much more inexpensive tomorrow if it is applied today.

'I am not a proponent of that and I suspect the majority of Canadians are not proponents of that, either. Is it kind of an oxymoron that people are advocating for public housing and yet the very tool that will make that happen, people will not be a proponent of that? The other way affordable housing can happen is through policy changes at the Federal and Provincial levels.'

Also supporting the Housing Pledge was Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, who said both the Province and the Feds have talked about 'initiatives to accelerate growth.'

'I think what's different this time around is both the Province and the Feds have both talked about initiatives to accelerate growth. We're going to see more applications than we ever have. We're already hearing from developers that they are going to put forward applications for 15 storey buildings in Aurora. We're going to have our hands full trying to manage those height limits that we have had always in place in the past. I hazard a guess how many units are just in one 15-storey complex, but they're coming?. The Province has repeatedly rewritten the OPs of municipalities throughout Ontario over the last year.

'It is happening whether we like it or not. When we put together our Official Plan, I wouldn't be surprised if a number of changes are made by the Province to accelerate that growth. So, I don't think you can look at past numbers to be able to say whether or not we're going to hit it. I think we will. Whether we like it or not. It's coming.'

By Brock Weir
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