

Special Council meeting called to discuss impacts of Provincial legislation

A Special Council Meeting has been called for this Tuesday, July 15, to discuss the local impacts of two recent ? and contentious ? pieces of Provincial legislation.

At issue are Bill 5 ? Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act ? and Bill 17 ? Protect Ontario by Building Faster and Smarter Act ? both of which have come under scrutiny for both their wide-reaching environmental impacts and how they impact a municipality's ability to plan itself.

The Special Council Meeting follows a delegation made to Council last month by Climate Action Newmarket-Aurora which called on local lawmakers to take a firm stand and push back on the legislation.

?What it will impact is our right to shape our communities, to protect our lands, our water, our wildlife, and to be heard,? Kathy Duncan of Climate Change Newmarket-Aurora told Council at the time. ?Bill 5 is not just about speeding up mining projects ? that's only six of its 220-plus pages?. Bill 5 provides the framework to overrule any and all provincial legislation and create special economic zones, which can be anywhere: the Greenbelt, Oak Ridges Moraine, or Provincial Parks like Algonquin, and with legal disclaimers built into the Bill such that there can be no recourse before, during or after any of the special projects.

?Bill 5 actually guts environmental and endangered species protections, leaving in place a vague conservation plan where added dollars are pointless given the reduction of species protections. As noted by Ontario Nature, it's like bringing a bucket to a wildfire. At the hearings, nature groups pleaded endangered species are not a Jenga game. Even removing one could cause the entire system to fail. Bill 5's gutting of the term ?habitat' essentially means this: You're safe in your bedroom, but not your kitchen, your yard or your local grocery store. And once you're out of the bedroom, that's it. It's like walking out of emerg with no recovery plan. Even fresh water is no longer a guaranteed protection.?

While Council didn't take a firm position either way last month, the Special Council meeting to potentially do just that was called by four Council members, one of whom is Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese.

In a statement, Weese cited the previous delegations to both Council and the Town's Environmental Advisory Committee, and said the July 15 meeting will be ?timely and allow Council to publicly discuss and debate these Bills, and formulate a measured Aurora response for consideration.?

?It is what diligent Councils do for their municipalities,? said Weese, before zeroing in on Bill 5. ?While legally enacted, municipal resistance, accompanied by environmental groups have raised questions aimed at challenging or modifying this legislation. Municipal concerns have been identified from the Bill's provisions to reduce regulatory barriers, expedite development, and centralize provincial authority. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) expressed cautious support for Bill 5's goal to speed up development, provided municipalities have meaningful input on Special Economic Zones (SEZ). In its May 26 submission, AMO urged that SEZs override local bylaws only with host municipal support and only in extraordinary circumstances, and insisted on preserving environmental protections, including species-at-risk safeguards, and upholding Indigenous rights. AMO's position urges care to ensure local voices and ecological responsibilities aren't sidelined nor undermines our Official Plan.?

On Bill 17, Councillor Weese said the legislation is ?narrowly focused? on construction standards and, like Bill 5, was expedited through Queen's Park for enactment without significant input.

?AMO has stated in their submission to the Environmental Registry of Ontario that, ?While we are supportive of efforts to standardize and streamline planning to help drive development, careful consideration needs to be given to the changes made under Bill 17 and proposed for further consultation? Municipal issues remain, such as undermining environmental protections for endangered species, the tree canopy and flood resistance, it also threatens accessibility standards by preventing municipalities from requiring enhanced accessible building standards.

“Advocacy for a balanced approach is needed that respects local governance and ensures that rapid growth does not come at the expense of livable, resilient, and accessible communities that respect heritage in both the built form and the environment. In Aurora we want to make things happen rather than watch or wonder what happened. [The Special Council meeting will] discuss the implications of these Bills on our municipality and formulate a measured response that reflects our Council's commitment to controlled growth, accessibility and environmental and heritage protection that relies on made-in-Aurora solutions. To do otherwise would abdicate Council's responsibility to our residents by meekly accepting terms of these two important Bills that affect us without comment.”

Mayor Tom Mrakas issued a statement on Friday, shortly after the Special Council Meeting was formally called.

He described the bills in question as “substantial and complex pieces of legislation” and have “elements within each bill” that raise legitimate concerns, “particularly around municipal autonomy and long-term fiscal sustainability” “but other elements within the bills could present “real benefits” to communities like Aurora.

“That's why many municipalities have taken a measured “wait and see” approach, rather than opposing the bills outright,” said Mayor Mrakas. “There's good reason for this. AMO has clearly stated that while some aspects of the legislation require clarification and adjustment, other proposals “like Development Charge modernization in Bill 17 and Special Economic Zones in Bill 5 “could help drive local economic growth if municipalities are full partners in the process. The reality is, these are framework bills, not finished products. The regulations that will define their real-world impacts have not yet been released. Even our municipal staff do not fully know what the implications will be. Unlike more straightforward bills “such as the reversal of tribunal rules “Bills 5 and 17 are layered, far-reaching, and depend heavily on how the regulations are written. Anyone claiming to know exactly how these will play out is not being truthful “because even the Province has acknowledged those details are still in development.

“As a member of the AMO Board “representing 444 municipalities across Ontario” I believe it is premature and irresponsible to oppose these bills in their entirety before understanding the full regulatory framework. AMO's position is clear: if the Province works with municipalities, many of the potential risks can be mitigated. Acting in opposition now, before those opportunities to collaborate have been exhausted, risks losing influence over how the final regulations are shaped. I remain hopeful that through open, ongoing dialogue with the Province, and by continuing to advocate for practical, transparent, and community-focused regulations, we can shape outcomes that work for everyone.

“In the meantime, I will not support motions that call for opposing both bills in their entirety. I believe the more responsible and constructive course of action is for our Town to stand with AMO and support their detailed, thoughtful submissions. I will continue to monitor developments closely, work collaboratively with our municipal partners and AMO, and respond in a way that is informed, balanced, and focused on outcomes. That is what leadership requires.”

By Brock Weir