Province intervenes with Wellington Street development as housing plan concerns continue

Move sparks Special Council meeting this week

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The Province of Ontario has intervened and has helped pave the way for an apartment complex that is proposed to be more than double the height limit allowed in Aurora's Official Plan.

The land in question is within the southwest quadrant of Wellington Street East and Leslie Street, a particularly busy commuter stretch of Wellington for drivers and transit alike as part of GO Transit's Barrie bus route.

Previously before Council in this quadrant was a proposal for a seven-storey apartment complex with 519 housing units, plus 12 townhouse blocks with a total of 59 units.

Council rejected the proposal this past spring, citing environmental and density concerns, as well as myriad concerns expressed by nearby residents, including those who call Adena Meadows, the community built around the Magna Golf Club, home.

In a statement issued by Mayor Tom Mrakas on November 9, Mayor Tom Mrakas said the Town was informed that Ontario's Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing amended York Region's Official Plan to allow buildings at 1289 Wellington Street East to reach a "minimum" of 12 storeys to achieve a density target of 330 units per hectare.

"This decision begs a series of question: why this specific parcel of land?" Mayor Mrakas asked in the statement. "It isn't a transportation corridor – it's barely serviced by a bus! Neither members of Aurora Town Council or York Regional Council – elected officials who know their communities best – were consulted prior to this drastic change to our Official Plan. I am extremely concerned about the precedent this could set for future planning decisions and the impact it could have on our residents.

"I have sent a letter to Minister Clark requesting a meeting immediately to discuss alternatives that would work in the best interests of current and future residents of Aurora."

The Province's efforts to increase housing units continue to come under scrutiny of local elected officials and this particular move in Aurora is set to be the focus of a Special Council meeting slated to take place just after press time.

Staff say the land in question, including the original proposal, is set to come before the Ontario Land Tribunal on Thursday, December 1, at 10 a.m.

"The Town is currently conducting a review of the Town's Official Plan to appropriately determine how the Town should grow over the next 30 years," said Edward Terry, Senior Policy Planner for the Town of Aurora, in a report that will be before Council this week. "Town staff are targeting June 2023 to present the Official Plan to Council.

"The minimum building height of 12 storeys and the proposed density of 330 units per hectare outlined in Modification 14 by the Province precedes a fulsome examination through the Official Plan Review or even a review by the OLT. The decisions made regarding height and density did not include any consultation with the Town of Aurora. An Interim Control Bylaw could allow time for a fulsome examination of the appropriate land use, density and height for the subject lands."

Elsewhere, there is growing opposition to Ontario's Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, which the Province has pitched as a way to increase housing units across Ontario.

The measures have seen vocal opposition from Mayor Mrakas – and getting Council to formally back opposition to the Bill is also on this week's agenda – as well as from Regional Council. Concerns have not been limited to land use, but also include concerns over elements of the bill that would slash development charges municipalities can levy on incoming builders. Such charges are used by communities for infrastructure related to the growth that comes from new developments.

On Friday, the Small Urban GTHA Mayors working group, chaired by Mrakas, came out in opposition as well.

"The Small Urban GTHA Mayors agree that housing availability and affordability is a priority issue in each of their municipalities," said the group in a statement. "Although we collectively agree with some of the aspects of the Bill, there are several unprecedented implications for small urban communities that need to be discussed. According to AMO (the Association of Municipalities of Ontario), the financial implications to Ontario's municipalities could be as much as $5.1 billion over the next nine years.

"The Small Urban GTHA Mayors are therefore calling on the Province to pause on proceeding with the proposed Bill in its current state and instead take the time to engage in meaningful consultations with local municipalities to achieve its objectives for sound decision-making for housing growth that meets local needs."

CARING COMMUNITY – Members of 100 Women Who Care Central York Region visited the York Region Food Network on Thursday afternoon to present the Industrial Parkway South-based organization with a donation of $12,875. 100 Women Who Care Central York Region meet quarterly and each member brings $100 of their own into the mix to make a donation at the end of the evening. For more on the organization, including their next meeting in January, visit 100womenwhocareCYR.ca. **Auroran photo by Brock Weir**

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