

York confirms 40% intensification

By Mark Pavilons

While rural municipalities in the GTA are planning for limited growth, York Region has confirmed its commitment to an intensification target of 40% as directed by the Province.

In a recorded vote at York Regional Council recently, councillors voted 12-7 in favour of confirming the minimum intensification target of 40%. King Mayor Steve Pellegrini and Aurora Mayor Dawe were among those opposed to the move.

During the King council meeting Feb. 21, Mayor Pellegrini said he was disappointed by the decision at the regional level. While King is desperately trying to protect its environment and limit development, York officials are moving full steam ahead in the larger urban centres such as Vaughan.

Pellegrini admitted while the target doesn't affect King itself, it does impact all the urban centres around us.

He also pointed out that York is carrying a huge debt, largely due to infrastructure and transit. Costs need to be recovered and there needs to be greater emphasis on a long-term vision. It's been proven, Pellegrini said, that growth doesn't pay for growth.

Since 45% of King homeowners' taxes go to the region, Pellegrini said they're trying to be stewards of these dollars.

York has asked the Province in the past that in order to meet such growth targets, they need provincial infrastructure funding, particularly in the area of rapid transit.

Intensification, York officials argue, rely heavily on rapid transit investments. York points to the Spadina and Yonge North subway extensions; bus transit along Yonge Street and Davis Drive, and improving GO rail services, as areas where Metrolinx, needs to provide investment dollars. York can't afford all of these projects on its own, so by voting to meet provincial targets, they hope to attract provincial dollars. At this point ?provincial investment in critical, inter-regional transit initiatives to support higher than minimum levels of intensification is yet to be confirmed.?

The move was part of York's current Municipal Comprehensive Review and Regional Official Plan update, which began in 2014. Staff previously prepared three draft growth scenarios, based on 40% intensification, 50% and 0%, which were endorsed in principle by council last April. Staff evaluation of the scenarios determined ?? the scenario that best achieves the goals, objectives and policies of the Region and the Province, while ensuring fiscal responsibility in the context of the market's ability to realize the forecasted growth, lay between 40% and 50% intensification ? Accordingly, in November 2015 Regional staff recommended a preferred growth scenario based on a 45% intensification level.?

Council received numerous deputations and submissions regarding this 45% level and then directed staff to undertake further analysis, comparing the recommended 45% level to the provincial minimum of 40%. Staff was also asked to create a comparative analysis of the mandated target for King, East Gwillimbury, Markham and Vaughan. The recent vote nixed any further study, keeping the target at 40%.

Staff noted that all municipalities within the Growth Plan area are required to develop and implement, through their official plans, a strategy and policy to phase in and achieve the intensification targets. Staff noted that York has, between 2006 and 2014, achieved 51% intensification.

The Province, meanwhile, is conducting a review of the Growth Plan, Greenbelt Plan, Oak Ridges Conservation Plan and the Niagara Escarpment Plan. The Province is expected to release draft amendments of these important documents this spring. York staff will keep these in mind when reviewing the MCR and ROP.

York council also directed staff to prepare a population, employment and land budget forecast for the Region, based on a minimum 40% intensification target, which means 40% of all new population growth would occur within established communities. This will provide multiple housing options for residents as well as supporting a resilient natural environment and agricultural system.

Staff will present the 40% scenario at the June 23 meeting of Regional council. Approval by Council is part of the Region's mandatory Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) of the Regional Official Plan (ROP). The approved scenario will be used as the basis for conforming to Ontario's Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Growth Plan) which now forecasts a population of 1.79 million and 900,000 jobs for York Region by 2041.

York Region is Canada's 7th largest municipality and Ontario's second-largest business centre, with almost 1.2 million residents and 49,000 businesses.