

Employment lands key to future health of King

By Mark Pavilons

Protecting employment lands for the future is vital to the economic health of King.

King councillors endorsed staff findings on two proposals to convert employment lands, and will forward their comments to York Region.

The Region is reviewing more than 50 conversion requests, in its comprehensive review and assessment being done in conjunction with the Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR).

The provincial growth plan now includes a 'one-time window' policy that allows municipalities to adopt an official plan amendment to convert employment lands to a designation that permits non-employment uses, including residential. The region is the authority for local OP amendments.

Through the MCR, York is updating employment policies and its employment forecast in the regional official plan. A land budget analysis is also being completed and this will determine the amount of land necessary to accommodate employment growth through 2014 and even beyond.

King is working on its new Official Plan, which should be in place by this fall. The Region hopes to adopt its new Official Plan in late 2020.

York has already set out criteria to evaluate the conversion requests. As it stands, employment areas are defined as 'areas designated in an official plan for clusters of businesses and economic activities, including but not limited to, manufacturing, warehousing, offices and associated ancillary facilities.' Residential and retail are prohibited. Conversion occurs when the land is designed to accommodate non-employment uses such as residential and major retail.

This past May, the Township received a conversion request from King Hill Inc., for roughly 21.5 hectares of employment lands at 2955 King Road. The land is located on the southeast corner of King and Jane and measures roughly 104 acres. These lands are currently designated as prestige employment and environmental protection area. Janeking Holdings Inc., owns land to the south and they're looking at building homes in that area.

The conversion proposed to maintain 35.8 acres of employment lands in the western portion of the property and to coordinate residential lands.

While there are no specific plans, the applicant may consider offices, seniors housing, etc.

'The client wants to do something very special there,' said agent Don Given.

Township staff said they want further discussions about this conversion and stress any development that occurs there has to be of high standard, since it's a gateway to King City.

Evans Planning, on behalf of the Boynton family, are asking for a conversion request for their lands at 12805 Highway 27. The 57-hectare property is home to the sod farm and are designated residential, natural heritage, business area and deferred residential. The owners want the lands designed to accommodate residential development and said they'd be flexible and willing to ask for a partial conversion.

Staff pointed out that maintaining employment lands in Nobleton will help build complete communities and diversify the tax base, which will support King's economic sustainability.

'Creative planning, increasing the flexibility of employment area uses, and high standards of design may assist in mitigating possible land use conflicts,' staff reported.

'Integrating uses would also make more efficient use of community amenities and services.'

Planning staff want to review the types of flexible employment uses that the region is considering, before any conversion takes place.

'Protecting employment lands within each of the Township's villages will contribute towards creating a competitive economic environment, complete communities, and the Township's economic sustainability,' staff wrote.

Angelo Santorelli, of the King Chamber of Commerce, said the business organization believes strongly that employment lands need to be set aside on an ongoing basis. In fact, having a surplus of such land may help keep the cost of land in a range that attracts business.

According to a statement from the Chamber, "If in future any designated employment land is to be converted to other purposes (residential), then such conversion should only occur after an equal or greater amount of newly designated, suitable employment lands have been identified and re-zoned accordingly."

Employment lands, the Chamber said, must include a variety of businesses. The Chamber also supports prestige employment for the Highway 400 corridor.

Hopes are the Region will release a report later this fall, which will contain more details about the Region's employment strategy. Staff will provide an update to council when more details become available.