

Residents rally against York move to examine corridors

By Mark Pavilons

A decision by York Regional Council to look at developing land along highway corridors has led to a rallying cry from local residents and environmental groups. York voted to reiterate its request to develop a process allowing municipalities to access strategically located employment lands in these corridors. Council also asked the Province to permit the extension of Great Lake based servicing, as an option to service settlement areas within the Greenbelt Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Plan areas. Those opposed to the plan see it as the Province opening up the Greenbelt to development, specifically designating industrial and commercial development along 400 series highways. Critics argue that politicians are turning their backs on environmental plans such as the Greenbelt Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the provincial Growth Plan. "Ontarians love the Greenbelt, yet some municipalities and developers keep pushing for paving these protected lands. Premier Doug Ford must immediately make it clear that opening the Greenbelt to development is against the law and will never be approved by the provincial government," said Tim Gray, executive director, Environmental Defence. Astonishingly, this attack on the Greenbelt is not based on a need for more development land, as evidence from the development industry's own planning consultants shows there are 12,000 hectares of land currently approved for development within municipal boundaries in York Region, he noted. This is larger than the entire area of the City of Richmond Hill and only slightly less than half the existing built employment land. Of this amount, 3,400 ha are employment lands, and 2,600 ha remain vacant as of 2017, larger than the total land area of King City. If the removal of these lands from the Greenbelt is approved, they would likely end up as malls and sprawling subdivisions since surplus employment lands can be converted to commercial or residential zoning. "This is the not-so-thin edge of the wedge" said Cindy Whitelaw, chair, Save the Oak Ridges Moraine. "A fact that's underscored by the Region's mention of looking forward to developing additional lands along the proposed Highways 413 and Holland Marsh Expressway (Bradford By-pass) if they are built through the Greenbelt. Two of the three areas proposed are in the Lake Simcoe watershed, and the area on Highway 400 between King and Vaughan contains areas of high quality natural cover. It is inappropriate to take out natural areas that should be protected through the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan, just when its legislative review is about to begin. We need better protection of these important natural features, not more malls," said Claire Malcomson, executive director, Rescue Lake Simcoe Coalition. "We are deeply concerned about piping water from, and sewage to, Lake Ontario," said Andrew McCammon, executive director, Ontario Headwaters Institute. "This is the time to fix existing water problems, such as salt in lakes and groundwater, algae caused by phosphorus in sewage, and the lack of water conservation, not create more problems with ill-considered, expensive, and prohibited pipelines." "This is another attempt by the development industry to pave over the Greenbelt," said Dr. Anne Bell, Director of Conservation and Education, Ontario Nature. "If the provincial government opens the Greenbelt at York Region's request, it would set a terrible precedent. It would contradict repeated assurances by the Premier that the Greenbelt is off limits to development. Land speculators would make millions while the rest of us would lose precious farmland and natural areas forever." Nobleton resident Nancy Hopkinson said looking at land only on the surface is not good enough. "There have been studies down beneath the surface, which shows that this land is important in the recharge and cleaning of water for us all to drink," she said. King, back in 2016, supported removing lands from the Greenbelt Plan for new employment uses along Highway 400 when required. King Mayor Steve Pellegrini said it doesn't give anyone carte blanche to develop. The motion changes nothing, and merely gives municipalities the opportunity to explore options. If deemed necessary, these lands can be examined through the existing comprehensive review process. Pellegrini said municipalities have to be innovative and explore all options when it comes to employment lands. We can't just say "no" to all ideas and grind to a halt, he pointed out. This idea has been discussed for more than a decade and it's included in King's own Economic Development Plan to look at employment lands adjacent to Highway 400. The two main areas in King would be the intersection of Highway 9 and the 400, and King Road and the 400. The mayor pointed out, no one—not King nor York officials—are saying "yes" to anything. They're stating an interest and looking at policies that govern this possibility. In face of the criticism, Pellegrini pointed out council has never voted in favour of shrinking the Greenbelt. In fact, he was one of the first to sign the initial "Greenbelt Pledge." Further, Councillor Avia Eek said if these lands are marginal farmland, they don't provide any agricultural value. This recent move by York is not definitive and nor does it set in motion any further action. "We have to be strategic," the mayor said. "Let's work together to achieve the goals we want." The report by regional staff indicated that generally speaking, lands adjacent to 400-series highways are

well suited for employment purposes. They admitted much of these lands in York are protected by the Greenbelt Plan for environmental and agricultural uses. York staff said the Province should develop a process to allow municipalities to access strategically located employment lands over the long term if deemed necessary through a Municipal Comprehensive Review. Regional staff have been asked by member municipalities to examine the competitive benefits of permitting new employment uses on these lands. In fact, interest from York dates back to 2004 when they asked the Province to allow them to amend the Greenbelt Plan to permit employment lands in areas like the 400 series corridor. In a 2015 report, York again asked the Province the very same thing, to develop a process to allow municipalities to access strategically located employment lands. The Growth Plan itself does state that economic development and competitiveness will be promoted by ensuring the availability of sufficient land, in appropriate locations, for a variety of employment uses to accommodate forecasted employment growth. Provincial planning policies also provide for a balance approach to growth management, promoting preservation of the natural environment, as well as promoting economic growth. York staff pointed out the region's location in the GTA is strategic for goods movement. It's a top destination for businesses across a number of industries, and many rely on access to transportation corridors. There are a wide range of business sectors that have very specific land requirements in terms of size, configuration, transportation access and proximity to other related businesses. The characteristics of ideal employment lands, as well as the overall supply, are important considerations in planning for York Region's long-term employment needs, according to staff. The Region has a limited supply of lands along 400 series corridors that provide visibility for businesses. The long-term vitality of the York Region economy demands high-profile, accessible locations for employment and in this regard the importance of the 400 series corridors to the economy is recognized by the Region, the local municipalities and the Province. Further, staff say York will attract the largest volume of job growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe by 2051. This past August, the Province released the final Growth Plan amendment and revised Land Needs Assessment methodology. York staff will undertake detailed forecasting and land needs assessment based on this. The role of the 400 series highway corridors, and the limited supply of land with direct exposure to them, are especially critical in York Region's long-term planning, staff concluded.