

Regulations, costs, plague planning process

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One of the issues people frequently ask me about is how a particular development in their neighbourhood was approved and who makes the decisions. I'd like to use my column today to shine some light on how the process works. It can be confusing for the average citizen to figure out the complicated decision-making processes. Planning can have an important effect on your life, particularly in a fast-growing area with a lot of development.

All levels of government have a say in local planning but you're not likely to have to deal with the federal government unless a development affects Lake Simcoe. Almost all planning is a shared responsibility by the provincial and municipal governments. The province writes the laws which set out the obligations of municipalities.

What does the province do?

The Ontario government decides policy under the Planning Act and prepares provincial plans such as the Greenbelt and the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan. Provincial plans designate Barrie as a growth area. The province promotes interests such as protecting farmland, natural resources and the environment as well as ensuring development is sustainable.

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing oversees Ontario's planning system and gives advice to municipalities and the public.

What do municipalities do?

Municipalities make local planning decisions, prepare official plans which set out general planning goals and write zoning bylaws with rules and regulations for projects. For most permits you deal with your local municipality.

For townships, local planning is determined by the town's official plan and the official plan of the county (Simcoe)?or region (York). Municipal bylaws under official plans can have an important effect on your property and it is important to know your rights and obligations. Official plans are generally reviewed every five years so you should keep an eye out for notices of meetings in the local paper or the town website.

You may also have to deal with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority if your home is near a watercourse or a wetland. Many activities, such as building a dock or a boathouse, require permits, which you can find out more about on their website.

So why do we have this very involved planning process and is it really necessary?

In an ideal world, we could all do what we want with our own property. In many cases, we can. However what you do with your own property can have a great effect on you and your neighbours. Preserving the livability of communities such as King makes planning necessary as we balance the demands of growth with the need to preserve our local environment and our quality of life. One of my main concerns with planning is there are too many regulations and costs. This is why I would love to hear your thoughts on any problems or ideas for reform that would make planning work better for you.

The Residential Construction Council of Ontario wrote a report in 2011, which outlined how some of our planning rules are driving up the cost of housing. They estimate that government imposed costs (such as development charges) can make up almost 20% of the cost of housing in GTA municipalities. Since government policies also restrict the amount of land that can be used for housing, we run the risk of many low-income or young families being unable to afford a home.

We must have a balanced planning system, one that allows the preservation of our communities and quality of life, while allowing for affordable housing for families.