

Time for residents to get involved in plan review process

By Mark Pavilons

It's time for concerned citizens to make a lot of noise and elevate the discussion on the environmental plans that protect lands in Ontario.

The lack of monitoring and any real data on environmental protection in this province is its main failing, according to Gord Miller, Ontario's Environmental Commissioner. Miller was the keynote speaker last Wednesday at a public forum hosted by Concerned Citizens for King Township at the Kingbridge Centre. London Publishing, owner of the King Weekly Sentinel, was the exclusive media sponsor of the event.

A capacity crowd gathered to hear from Ontario's top environmental cheerleader, who provided an overview of our shortcomings, while offering insights on what the future holds.

The event was put together by CCKT to inform residents about the importance of the 2015 reviews of major pieces of legislation ? the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan and Greenbelt Plan.

Once the envy of the world regarding environmental policy, Ontario's focus has declined and public service cuts in the ministries that handle environmental issues have led to lackluster enforcement and no follow-through monitoring.

The province currently lacks the professional capacity of experts ? those important ?boots on the ground? ? to ensure our environmental plans are working. Miller stressed that it's our tax dollars that fund environmental protection so taxpayers should demand they be invested where it counts. The once powerful Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and Ministry of the Environment (MOE) have been ?gutted?? and their combined budgets today account for less than one cent out of every tax dollar. Even by increasing their budgets twofold would see changes and not affect the big tax picture.

He is not adverse to tax increases if they can be directed to the environment.

Miller also told the audience to never underestimate the ?noise?? made by people to their elected officials. With impending provincial and municipal elections this year, it's vital to ?explain it to them.?

An officer of the Legislative Assembly, Miller's role is to critically evaluate government decisions and the provincial planning system as it relates to the environment.

Broad rules have been set out in a number of key pieces of legislation ? the forerunner of them all, the Niagara Escarpment Act, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, Greenbelt Plan, and now the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan.

While somewhat controversial at the outset, today these plans have been embraced as our guiding lights, but unfortunately have lacked performance monitoring indicators.

So, it's difficult to say whether they've been successful or not, without that on-the-ground data. With no real metrics, this has inherent problems, Miller pointed out.

Regarding the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe the Ministry of Infrastructure did not develop indicators and the plan has undergone two substantial amendments and changes, with no evaluation, no metrics and no real measurements.

One of the problems is government ministries tend to create plans, draft discussion papers but never finalize anything.

The only plan that works is the Niagara Escarpment Plan, created in the 1970s with its own monitoring system.

While the ORMCP tries to ensure ecological integrity, it too lacks a monitoring network.

It's great to set high standards, Miller noted, but it all falls apart when there's no monitoring mechanism in place.

The Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation was doing it, but the province cut its funding and the foundation folded.

What we have in Ontario is a ?planning hodgepodge? and Miller came out swinging in a recent report to Queen's Park. He said he was ?astounded? at the failure to develop monitoring and evaluation for the Greenbelt and ORMCP and it was ?disconcerting?? that the Growth Plan was amended ?in the dark.?

The problem lies with responsibilities fragmented between ministries. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is the lead ministry for land use planning and has adopted a ?one window policy?? but this has proven to be ineffective. Miller explained that previously, both MOE and MNR were lead commenting agencies on all development applications in this province and they had field staff to provide on-site expertise. Both ministries have suffered staff cuts over the years and currently ?no one in government is looking at the land.?

But our hands aren't tied as concerned citizens.

Miller said we need to take a step back, push for, and help create, a transparent monitoring and evaluation framework for all land use plans. It is the government's responsibility and there needs to be a long-term commitment to environmental monitoring. The government doesn't always get things right so in order to make proper decisions, they need full knowledge of the situation and the

consequences.

When asked about the role of the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), Miller said it was created at a time when municipalities were ill equipped to make complicated decisions, but that's no longer the case today.

Developers aren't necessarily the villains in all of this, they are merely playing the game as the rules are laid out. If sloppy decisions are made, they take advantage of them.

"We can't allow bad decisions to be made," he said.

Former environment minister Ruth Grier, who was one of the first to propose an environmental bill of rights, is worried that the government will move to a uniform environmental protection strategy and asked about opportunities within the next year that residents can get involved.

Miller said we need to raise the discussion standards and have substantive talks that will see these pieces of legislation continue to have teeth.