

Residents voice opposition to employment lands at Highway 400 and King Road

By Angela Gismondi

A recommendation regarding potential employment lands at Highway 400 and King Road set off some alarm bells.

The recommendation was part of the report on the review of the four provincial plans, prepared by the Township's planning staff and presented at the committee of the whole meeting Monday. It includes a number of comments and concerns pertaining to the 2015 provincial review of the Oak Ridges Moraine (ORM) Conservation Plan, the Greenbelt Plan and the Growth Plan.

One recommendation in particular was the focus of the discussion at the meeting ? to amend the Greenbelt Plan to allow for the development of strategic employment lands adjacent to 400 series highways ?if there is sufficient demonstration and justification provided to the satisfaction of the Minister and on the recommendation of the local and regional municipality.?

Nobleton resident Nancy Hopkinson said it would be a mistake to remove the lands at Highway 400 and King Road from the Greenbelt for strategic employment. She noted the odd the contour of the southern boundary of the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan at Highway 400 and the King Road and that the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan says that the boundary of the Oak Ridges Moraine was ?based on a number of topographical, geomorphological and geological attributes, including the 245 metre (above sea level) contour along the southern boundary of the Moraine from the Town of Richmond Hill to the eastern boundary of the Municipality of Clarington.?. According to Hopkinson, the contour levels around King Road and Highway 400 are much higher than 245 metres and range from 295 to 300 metres.

?My theory is, I don't know if it's true, was there political pressure to make the land at Highway 400 and the King Road available for development?? asked Hopkinson. ?Was there political influence to exempt this section from the Oak Ridges Moraine? This area ? Highway 400 and the King Road ? should have been labeled Oak Ridges Moraine. It is now in the Greenbelt.?

She said removing the land from the Greenbelt could lead to environmental degradation of the ORM and the Greenbelt caused by road salt, impermeable surfaces and run-off. She also suggested sanitary sewers and water pipes would need to be installed which could lead to more urban sprawl. Furthermore, opening up the area to strategic employment would make it difficult to develop King City's prestige employment area, Schomberg's industrial area and Nobleton's business park.

?Each little piece removed from the Greenbelt makes it that much easier to remove the next piece,? said Hopkinson. ?There is enough land designated to be employment lands both in King Township and in York Region, more lands are not needed. Keep King green. Do not remove any land from the Greenbelt. ?Pave paradise, put up a parking lot' is not King's theme.?

Bruce Craig shared concerns on behalf of Concerned Citizens of King Township. He commended staff on the thorough report and said the group is ?encouraged by and supportive of? many of the comments and recommendations. He pointed out that over 99 per cent of King is identified as protected countryside in the existing Greenbelt Plan and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan applies to 65 per cent of the Township and that's why it's important that King sets an example.

?We don't support any removal of the Greenbelt lands,? said Craig adding growing the Greenbelt and providing more protection would be ideal. ?Every interchange of the 400 series Highway shouldn't be developed. We have very adequate lands available in settlement areas for employment lands ?. The need for this is not clearly there.?

Lieutenant Colonel (ret'd) Susan Beharriell was unavailable to attend the meeting but asked Craig to read her comments.

?I realize that in the past, council voted to join a number of municipalities in requesting that lands by intersections along Highway 400, particularly the King Road and 400 area, be removed from the Greenbelt so that they may be developed in the future,? stated Beharriell. ?However, since the writing of the plan and that vote, a number of new facts have come to light. First of all King's growth numbers have been lowered by the Region from original forecasts. Secondly, the Region has reassessed King's employment needs for the foreseeable future and concluded that King has already zoned more than sufficient land for its employment needs ? There clearly is no need for more employment areas and no need for more housing. This information was not available when the original recommendations were made. Is it still valid to make this request, given the new analysis??

Stephen Kitchen, director of planning for the Township of King, responded to the comments. Excluding Highway 400 and King Road from the Oak Ridges Moraine legislation was not a political decision on the part of the Township, he said.

?I can certainly attest that in no manner was it political,? stated Kitchen. ?The recommendation that staff is making to you today is not a recommendation that these lands be removed from the Greenbelt Plan. What we're saying to you is effectively we could be in the situation where we need more employment lands. If there is justification for additional strategic employment lands, we're asking that the province modify the Greenbelt Plan to allow that process to take place if municipalities are able to demonstrate a need before the next review in 10 years. King Township may never be in the situation where it needs to ask. This is a way to protect you

in the event that you need this.?

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti agreed the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan was not political.

?If any plan was implemented politically, it's the Greenbelt Plan ? I see it as entirely political, whereas the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan is scientifically based,? said Mortelliti, adding the purpose of the Greenbelt Plan, implemented by the provincial Liberals, was to stop sprawl and focus development within villages, urban boundaries and large urban centres.

His concern is if strategic employment lands are not available, the Township may not be able attract prestigious companies and other industry such as warehouses and trucking companies would move in.

?My personal opinion is that it is appropriate at the 400,? said Mortelliti, adding that employment areas don't belong near prestigious residential developments.

Councillor Debbie Schaefer is opposed to any development in that area.

?I certainly am not supportive of proceeding with this as I understood it,? said Schaefer. ?There is a lack of understanding as to what would drive us to take such a step which I view as being very high risk, changing King Township and what we view as our vision for being a rural municipality.?

Schaefer said she needs more information and if it's financial need that is driving this, she asked that financial forecasts for the next 10 years be provided.

?We always say that King is not evolving in the same way as our neighbours and now we're going to have an interchange that looks like all the areas to the south of us,? said Schaefer. ?That makes me nervous.?

Councillor David Boyd said this is an opportunity for King to be a leader. He recognized the importance of balancing economic and environmental issues.

?Given that the Greenbelt is likely to be reviewed in 10 years, I understand we can't necessarily handcuff ourselves,? said Boyd.

?We have an opportunity here to lead by example and not follow the norm. We don't want to be what is south of us, we're the start of something great. Could King set an example for the municipalities to the north of us when we one day consider what can be on those lands. I feel the lands at the 400 are one of our most valuable assets and deserve our utmost consideration for an economically and environmentally sustainable community.?

Mayor Steve Pellegrini agreed with the recommendation to allow development on the lands should an appropriate opportunity arise.

?We want to have policies that if something happens, we have options because right now there are no options,? said Pellegrini. ?We don't want to be handcuffed.?

Councillor Bill Cober was also pleased with the report.

?I think this report is visionary and pragmatic,? said Cober. ?Thank you to staff for having the vision to recognize that our employment lands in King Township are evolving and growing. This is a big report and has the ability to impact our municipality.?

The report, including comments and concerns from council and the public, will be sent to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The intent is that the recommendations are considered and incorporated in the review of the four provincial plans.