

Increasing densities premature, King councillors say

By Mark Pavilons

In an ever-changing landscape of growth, King Township continues to fine-tune its Official Plan.

The plan review process moved forward last week, with approval of recommendations presented by Meridian Consulting, but not before councillors deferred and referred certain matters pertaining to densities in King City.

In the face of pressure to grow beyond previous provincially mandated targets, highly regulated King is reluctant to open the floodgates to future development, despite indications that more growth is inevitable.

The issue of the cost of growth was stressed by Mayor Steve Pellegrini, who advised that York Region has come out saying that residential growth doesn't pay for itself and it's a real cost on municipalities. The emphasis is shifting to concentrate on businesses and jobs, to improve the financial bottom line of local government.

Mayor Pellegrini suggested that King "lay off the accelerator" a bit regarding residential construction, and focus on jobs and business. "With a battle looming with developers appealing King's recently approved development charges bylaw, the municipality is poised to tread carefully."

Regarding growth, King will top out at just under 35,000 people by 2031, an increase of 14,600 residents. Additional residential units have already been constructed or approved, leaving roughly 12,200 still to come. Greenfield areas and remaining vacant lands cannot accommodate this total, leaving a shortfall of roughly 1,200 people.

To accommodate this shortfall, Meridian notes King can create more intensification, increase densities in greenfield areas, or a combination of the two.

The consultants are recommending that densities permitted within the designated greenfield area be increased to meet the population forecast to 2031.

York Region's Official Plan requires King to develop an intensification strategy to look at the targets, examine regional corridors, GO facilities, local infill, etc. For intensification targets, Meridian is recommending that King City be allocated another 457 units, while Schomberg could accommodate 89 more.

More should be directed to King City, they say, because of its GO station link, proximity to Highway 400 and future growth at Seneca College.

And that's where local councillors put the brakes on.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti said he supports a prohibition on new lot creation, but he struggles with more residential development in his ward. Residents are constantly asking when services and facilities will arrive, to keep up with the influx of new residents. While local planning is looking at the "live, work, play" concept, Mortelliti observed that in his area, it's more like "commute, sleep, commute."

"That's what King City is," he said, adding he would like to see that balance, with more jobs and more recreational facilities. "Show me live, work, play," he said.

Increasing the density in King City is "premature," noting they shouldn't be focusing on more cars and more houses in the future. Meridian's Nick McDonald pointed out there's a lot of interest in intensification and simply accommodating large, estate lots "is not good planning."

Councillor Debbie Schaefer said King City is urbanizing, but it's not an urban centre. She suggested they get in front of the density and population issues and plan for it.

Mary Muter, on behalf of the Kingscross Ratepayers' Association, offered her group's support for the prohibition of new lot creation in existing subdivisions. As one of the oldest estate subdivisions in the country, Kingscross has unique character and this should be maintained.

David Jeanneret had a different view. As owner of 20 acres in the 100-acre South Summit Farm Road development, he would like to see an appropriate development plan for this area. These are 10, 10-acre lots in a unique development that was created in the 1950s. Tom Allen, president of the King Chamber of Commerce, stressed that sustainability ensures for both today and tomorrow and his organization believes job growth is paramount. The Official Plan can build business confidence and he would like to see more shovel-ready lands for business, consistent with population growth. He pointed out King needs options for young people to actually engage in the live, work, play concept.

The Chamber, he noted, will continue to provide input into the OP review, through stage three.

Meridian has made a lot of progress to date, and they're wrapping up phase two, which came to a close with the presentation to council. Phase two included the creation of seven policy direction areas, which included growth management, intensification,

existing neighbourhoods, greenfield densities, employment lands and more.

The consultants recommend that current building height maximums be maintained, but that increased heights be considered on a site specific criteria.

King should be as clear as possible as to where intensification should occur and this will help pre-identify areas and provide clarity. This will help in planning and may expedite development approvals, saving staff time in the planning process. To that end, they recommend the Official Plan should pre-identify intensification areas; provide evaluation criteria and a pre-zoning of intensification areas within the village cores.

Pressures over the next two decades could see the need for new lots and multiple unit developments.

Current policies in all three Community Plans generally permit the creation of new lots in existing subdivisions, provided they reflect the characteristics of the neighbourhood. The consultants are recommending this practice end and that detailed policies be created to regulate development on existing lots.

King won't be able to meet the target of 34,900 people by 2031 if 920 units are developed through 2031 and current densities for vacant lands are retained.

It's recommended the densities permitted within King City's designated greenfield area be increased to ensure King meets those 2031 population targets. Meridian sees seven units per hectare as an acceptable level. Comparatively speaking, McDonald said that is still a very low number. But that's where councillors differed.

Given Nobleton's servicing constraints, it's recommended that the new Official Plan limit the village's population to 9,500 by 2041. With regards to employment, the target is 11,900 jobs by 2031, which represents an increase of 4,800 jobs. There are roughly 80 hectares of vacant employment lands available in King and these could be home to some 2,000 jobs. With Magna's development west of King City, bringing with it some 700 new jobs, the consultants strongly believe King can meet its employment targets, and there's no need to consider additional employment lands at this time.

Regarding the structure of the Official Plan, it's recommended that vision, goals and objectives that apply Township-wide should be established up front in the new plan. Goals and objectives unique to the villages should be in separate sections that apply to each of the main communities.

The recommended policy directions will lead into phase three of the review, during this fall and into early 2016.