

Council debates densities, buffers in King City OPA

By Mark Pavilons

Development is coming to the northeast quadrant of King City. The only question is how many units will be allowed on a large parcel owned by several developers.

King councillors struggled with density, access and environmental issues during a public meeting looking to an Official Plan amendment presented by the King City East Landowners Group. The 204-hectare parcel (504 acres) stretches from Dufferin west to Keele; King Road, north to the 15th Sideroad.

The requested amendment calls for an increase in density on the lands to seven units per hectare and a reduction of environmental buffer zones from 30 to 10 metres.

Councillors struggled with both of these issues, but are aware that this area has already been earmarked for residential development. The principle has been established, CAO Susan Plamondon told councillors. The only question that remains is what form and to what extent.

One contentious issue of extending Tawes Trail for vehicle access was debated, and staff asked for a clear direction from councillors so they can proceed with their preliminary review. Councillors decided to take Tawes off the table and preserve it for pedestrian access and leisure activities.

King is facing some pressure from several fronts regarding pushing the boundaries on intensification and upping the density of houses in built communities. Examples from across York, and population targets laid down by the Province are pointing to higher densities and greater populations.

King has been comfortable with large, spacious lots and large buffer zones, protecting our green spaces. King is the only municipality in York that still enforces a 30-metre buffer zone. Others have lowered it to 10 metres.

Precedents exist for increasing densities and lowering buffers, but councillors are reluctant to follow suit. Councillor Bill Cober pointed out, though, that if King doesn't review their policies and re-examine these matters, they may be forced upon them by other levels of government or the Ontario Municipal Board.

Further, King is in the midst of reviewing its Official Plan and village zoning bylaws. As well, planning staff will present a report on densities to council at its May 16 meeting.

Planning director Stephen Kitchen noted that it's a bit of a trade-off, but reducing buffer zones do not result in additional homes, but rather smaller lots.

In his report, Kitchen noted this application has changed form over the last couple of years, to reach its current state.

The existing King City Community Plan permits a gross density of 3 units per hectare on the majority of these lands, and 5 per hectare on lands immediately north of the railway corridor.

Looking ahead, if these lands are developed at the proposed intensities, King City will grow to 14,000 people from its projected 12,000 level by 2031.

The applicants held a public meeting March 2 to obtain comments from the public, and these have been received by the Township. Concerns so far included the road connection of Tawes Trail to Keele; the population increase; densities; buffers; sewer and water servicing and traffic.

Don Givens, representing the landowners, said upping the density to 7 units per hectare is consistent with the rest of York and it's still less than the regional average. He argued this density is consistent with other established areas of King City.

They agreed the connecting link using Tawes is unnecessary and consultants suggested it be dropped from consideration.

The Oak Ridges Moraine Plan does permit 10-metre buffers in settlement areas, he said, noting this is not a significant departure from the philosophy of King's plan.

Greg Locke, representing Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT), said after much consideration, his group favours the application. They do believe in preserving the environment and are asking that the buffers be maintained. He said the 7 units per hectare is not a large stretch and CCKT would like to see more local employment.

Norm Elmhirst, a Jenkinson Grove resident, said this application is premature, without finding a connecting road and determining the traffic impacts. He too, agreed using Tawes is not possible, so he's worried about the impact on smaller roads in the area.

Susan MacDonald, representing the owners at 1330 Dufferin, said their client is not involved in the application, but supports the proposed density, which would allow for greater housing varieties.

Bill Kennedy, who lives on East Humber Drive, recognizes the area is growing, but is adamant the buffer be maintained. Don't fragment the environment, he told councillors.

John Leggette, head of The Country Day School, said he recognizes the need for balance, but is worried the surroundings of this renowned independent country school will become urbanized. Traffic on Dufferin is already a concern and he's concerned about future impacts to students.

The school and its students enjoy tremendous green areas.

Without leaving their property, they can study nature and stewardship.

He urged councillors to retain the setbacks.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti pointed out this area was approved for development some 16 years ago. The area would see major changes, even if the developers weren't seeking an increase in densities.

Resident Susan Beharriell pointed out the buffer zones are in place to preserve the natural features and wildlife. They should be preserved. The wetlands in the area would be threatened and this estimated 16% increase in King City's population would put a strain on the village.

Ian Hilley, speaking on behalf of the Kingscross Ratepayers' Association, said he lauds King's hesitation on this matter. He said his group is concerned that this application is an effort to leapfrog the planning process.

This intensification would place a further burden on the infrastructure and it's simply too much, too fast.

John Shen said some 300 local households oppose this bid in its current form, noting 7 units is too drastic a change. He suggested a compromise. He also encourages the applicants to work with the residents.

Mary Elmhirst pointed out that Jenkinson Grove and Carmichael Crescent were simply not designed to handle increased traffic that will result from this development.

Consultant reports, dating back as far as 1982, pointed out transportation issues must be solved before any approvals are given.

Roz Martin, from nearby Manitou Drive in Kingscross, said a plan on paper is not abstract, but consists of rivers, hills, ponds, streams and trees. She reminded councillors that we are the stewards and people live in King City because it's green.

Mortelitti added since development here is inevitable we must see if we can make the best of it.

People are accepting growth, but he's adamant that any construction should not disrupt existing neighbourhoods and every effort should be made to keep our existing subdivisions stable.

The Township, he said, should explore other access points to these lands, and also review the possibility of traffic signals in front of Country Day School.

Councillor Bill Cober observed Township staff are still waiting for input from York Region and the conservation authority.

Councillor Debbie Schaefer admitted that such increased densities makes her heart pound and change is often difficult to accept.

However, even at 7 units per hectare, King is still greener than any of its counterparts.

She also said this application doesn't contain anything new or innovative, looking instead like a plan from 20 years ago. In essence, it's sprawl, she said. We are not building a smart, 21st century subdivision.

She challenged the developers to look at something different.

The proposed OPA is still under review by staff, as is the Township's outdated Official Plan. The new OP will address long-term growth issues, sustainable development, key issues, consistent policies and more. The draft OP will include growth management, intensification, densities, employment lands and existing neighbourhoods.

Last fall, staff and OP review consultants Meridian Planning came to the conclusion that densities permitted within the designated Greenfield areas should be increased to meet the Region's population forecast to 2031.

The figure of 7 units per hectare was supported, with provisions that increases and decreases could be considered on a site-specific basis.

It's clear that King won't be able to meet the Region's overall population target of 34,900 based on current intensification. Therefore, densities should be increased to make up the shortfall.

The Province's Growth Plan does concede that municipalities can develop their own policies and phasing strategies to achieve the targets in a way that respects the community's character.

As review of this application progresses, staff will collect all of the input received from residents and commenting agencies and report back to council at a later date.