

Densities no longer the 'elephant in the room'?

By Mark Pavilons

King councillors are warming up to the idea of increasing densities in new residential development.

After hearing from the Township's consultants, who are leading the review of the Official Plan, councillors felt more at ease with the recommendations that densities in King be increased to seven units per hectare, particularly in expanding King City.

The matter of just how densities materialize on the ground, and the actual impact of the recommended increases, were thoroughly explained by Nick McDonald, president of Meridian Planning Consultants, which is undertaking the OP review. He went through growth management and greenfield densities for councillors.

He said during their analysis, if King sticks with its currently approved density levels, it will result in a shortfall, and the municipality won't meet provincially mandated growth targets.

He said while some levels can be reached, 'we can do better.'

The best options available to the Township is to increase densities to an average of 7 units per hectare, referring to this as a 'modest change.' McDonald noted this is nothing 'radical,' especially when you consider that surrounding municipalities are many times that number.

As well, current densities in existing subdivisions in King City hover between 5 and 6 units per hectare, so 7 is not a big jump.

'Seven is the new normal,' he said.

He explained how densities are measured, and how buffer zones are factored in to the equations. It comes down to math, he said, pointing to other subdivisions as comparisons.

Some areas of King City, such as Valley King, have densities above 9/hectare, which is still a lot lower than nearby Maple or Richmond Hill.

With higher densities, lot sizes drop and house coverage increases.

With the application by the King City East Landowners Group, densities and buffers are key. They're looking for an official plan amendment to increase densities and reduce buffers in a 204-hectare parcel (504 acres) stretches from Dufferin west to Keele; King Road, north to the 15th Sideroad.

McDonald noted 18% of these lands are buffer zones, so in the end the net density will hover around 9.

He also touched on employment lands and jobs, which are also mandated in the provincial growth plan. With the coming of Magna, King will be able to increase its employment stats and there's no need to look for additional land. He did point out that employment lands do need to be monitored and protected.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini said the existing 30-metre buffers are unique to King, and there's a push to maintain them. King is a leader in this regard. King's target population of 34,900 isn't changing, they're simply just shuffling around the development within the municipality.

The Province, and not the municipality, is the governing body for planning. They're making changes to the Greenbelt and Oak Ridges Moraine and they're also pushing for complete communities. Regarding greenfield densities, the Province is suggesting as much as 80 units per hectare in some areas.

Mary Muter, representing the Kingscross Ratepayers' Association, said they're concerned about densities, and it's not fair to shove them on King City, simply because other areas don't have the servicing capacity. She questions whether such new growth is sustainable. The character of King City, and particularly areas like Kingscross, are open and natural and new development should blend in.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti observed that York Region is slated to grow by 300,000 in the next decade or so. King remains an 'oasis' considering what's around us.

Planner Joan MacIntyre observed that there are other factors when considering density. Buffers, parks, school zones are all examples of open space. King, she said, has more open space than you'd think.

The density recommendations don't apply to areas deemed agricultural or natural heritage.

Staff reported that the density policies within the King City Community Plan (approved in 2001) reflect the Township's intent to be environmentally proactive, to maintain natural features and ensure long-term protection with the 30-metre buffer in place.

King has an intensification target of 920 units through 2031, 546 of which are moving forward. It's recommended that 457 of those be planned for King City, and the remaining 89 directed to Schomberg.

King City remains as the top contender for the simple fact that Nobleton lacks servicing capacity for more growth at this time.

Capacity is currently restricted to 6,590 people and when current projects are built out, that number will be reached.

?The servicing situation in Nobleton is such that the Township is unable to approve any further development to implement the existing land use designations within the existing Urban Area Boundary of the Nobleton Community Plan,??according to the staff report.

York's estimated population targets for 2041 show King to reach a population of 37,900.

Consultants said there is a potential for Nobleton reach a population of between 8,800 and 10,500, but not until York Region provides extra servicing capacity.

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.