

Council passes motion strengthening Greenbelt

By Mark PavilonsEditorLocal JournalismInitiative Reporter

King Township has penned a motion, urging the Province to strengthen protection of the Greenbelt. King is also asking Queen's Park to provide the necessary tools to enforce Greenbelt policies. The Greenbelt Plan, originally passed in 2005 and amended in 2017, is due for review. The Plan informs decision-making to permanently protect the agricultural land base and the ecological and hydrological features, areas and functions occurring on this landscape. Although primarily implemented through Ontario's land use planning system, including official plans, this Plan is not solely a land use plan. Certain policies of this Plan contemplate implementation by both the Province and municipalities through other related tools, regulations, policies and guidelines. King Mayor Steve Pellegrini and Councillor Debbie Schaefer created two motions. Staff and council reviewed them to come up with the best of both, in one super-motion. Council supports the review of the Greenbelt Plan's existing boundaries and policies within and beyond King Township in order to strengthen the protections of the agricultural network that provides food security, the natural ecosystems that provide numerous ecosystem services and the hydrologic systems that provide safe drinking water while recognizing the need to achieve an appropriate balance of the four pillars of sustainability identified in the 'Our King' Official Plan (environmental, economic, socio-cultural and financial). Council calls on the Province to collaborate with municipalities, Indigenous communities, the agricultural sectors and other stakeholders in this review to ensure that all interests are considered. Council requests this review must be transparent, evidence-based, and subject to independent oversight to prevent the influence of political or private interests, with all mapping, data, and rationale made publicly available. Council is also asking the Province to provide municipalities with the necessary legislative and regulatory tools to effectively implement the policies and objectives of the Greenbelt Plan, including but not limited to site plan control for residential development within the area of influence of key natural heritage and hydrological features. The motion mentions some of the details of the Greenbelt Plan and some unique features of this area. The Greenbelt Plan provides permanent protection for farmland and ecologically and hydrologically significant landscapes, working in tandem with Source Water Protection Plans and the Provincial Policy Statement to guide sustainable land use. The Greenbelt Plan is designed as an agricultural forward land use framework intended to permanently protect prime farmland, provide water security, reduce speculative pressure, and support Ontario's food security and rural economies. The Greenbelt functions as a living system of forests, wetlands, rivers and farmland that provides climate resilience by moderating floods, recharging groundwater, sequestering carbon, and sustaining biodiversity. Municipalities face increasing pressure from growth, aggregate extraction and climate related risks, and require strong enforceable tools to protect water, farmland and natural systems for future generations. It was noted that more than 98 per cent of King's land base lies within the Greenbelt, encompassing prime agricultural lands, the Oak Ridges Moraine, the headwaters of the Humber and Holland Rivers, and a portion of the Holland Marsh Specialty Crop Area that contributes significantly to Ontario's food security and agricultural economy. King's 'Our King' Official Plan, currently under review, identifies the environment as one of its four pillars. In 2015, a coordinated land use planning review recommended expansion of the Greenbelt into key hydrological areas such as moraines and headwater systems to further safeguard water and ecological health. The Greenbelt Act, 2005 requires a review of the Greenbelt Plan at least every 10 years and the next mandatory review must begin in 2025, there is opportunity to reaffirm and strengthen protections for farmland, natural heritage, and hydrological systems. Municipalities require clear, consistent, and enforceable tools to implement Provincial policy and protect the integrity of the Greenbelt from the cumulative pressures of growth, aggregate extraction, and climate-related risk. A copy of the resolution be forwarded to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, Stephen Lecce, MPP, King Vaughan, Caroline Mulrone, MPP, York-Simcoe, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), Edward McDonnell, CEO Greenbelt Foundation, York Region, and all local municipalities in York Region.