

King council refuses endorsement, but wants to help Augustinians with future plans

By **Mark Pavilons** Editor Local Journalism Initiative

King councillors found themselves in a catch-22 with a recent request. Council jostled with a disdain for a Ministerial Zoning Order, while siding with the idea for a local project. With few options available to them, the owners of Marylake asked council to endorse an MZO, helping to further their plans for a large-scale seniors complex on their large property north of King City. MZOs are not the preferred planning tool for local municipalities and King councillors were unanimous in their dislike for this route. However, they were sympathetic to Marylake owners, who have some ambitious plans for needed facilities. Not only will this project fill a huge void, it will save the brotherhood from extinction. Council decided not to endorse the request for an MZO, but agreed to organize and host a round-table discussion with all stakeholders, in hopes some common ground can be found. According to staff, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing may issue an MZO at their discretion, without consultation or appeal processes. MZOs may provide zoning approval for any type of development and may be issued (theoretically) without the need to conform to local OPs or policies of upper tier levels. The request from the Augustinian Fathers (Ontario) Inc. centres around redevelopment and revitalization of their property at 14260 Keele, next to Villanova. AFOI is proposing an Augustinian Village, a master plan that includes long-term care and seniors living facilities. It would also provide nursing care and even hospice care. The concept is a Continuum of Care Village that promotes the aging in place concept. The whole idea arose out of necessity, to help fund the renovation and expansion of the current landmarks on the property. They include a retreat centre, monastery, renowned Shrine of Our Lady of Grace, convent and historic Henry Pellat barn. Quinto Annibale, speaking on behalf of the AFOI, said they're at a crucial crossroads in their history and the success of this plan will dictate their future. Their 65-year history on the property could come to an end if no help is in sight and they will literally wither away. They have resources for perhaps two more years of operation, Annibale said, noting the King Township site is the last remaining Augustinian foothold left in Canada. They formed a lay board to investigate solutions and sustainability and their current plans, and need for an MZO, are vital to their continued existence. In total, they require some \$30 million to bring all of the buildings up to standard, including \$10 million to restore the Pellat barn, one of the largest historic barns left in Ontario. He said they've turned over every rock for alternatives, but the restrictive zoning in the Oak Ridges Moraine prohibits any development. This is why the MZO is key to securing their future. Annibale stressed their objectives are in the public interest and this application won't set any precedents in terms of zoning. Their seniors' village concept is much needed and supported by residents. The natural beauty is the heart of the property, and their priority is protecting the environment, he said. They plan to use existing building footprints and make the least invasive changes possible, to respect the ORM. He said the AFOI would welcome a heritage designation on the barn so it's preserved. He said they're not looking for a shortcut, but admitted this seems to be their only route. Some councillors expressed support for the concept, but all were leary about the MZO and environmental impacts on the ORM. Councillor Jakob Schneider said the seniors complex is music to my ears. He cited a personal example of trying to find his grandfather accommodations. The aging in place idea is fantastic and this project is a great step in the right direction. Councillor Jordan Cescolini, who also shared a family story, agreed in with the idea, and securing much-needed seniors living accommodation. It would be a dream to host a village like this in King, he said. One resident said if the Township endorsed the MZO, it would give the Province carte blanche in terms of planning. A Nobleton man, who's involved in seniors housing, gave his unequivocal support to the project. The AFOI proposal would provide housing close to home and maintain family connections, providing a glimmer of hope to seniors. Mary Muter, from the Kingscross Ratepayers' Association, said they're concerned this development will disturb nearby wetlands, impacting water quality, plants, wildlife and wells for residents of Kingscross. Democracy is on the line and council cannot endorse the MZO, she said. Another long-time resident said large-scale projects are an assault on the ORM. And another man said the impacts on the watercourse will affect thousands of people downstream. Resident and former councillor Susan Lloyd Swail said the AFOI master plan needs a lot more thought. The ORM Plan, she said, is clear in its prohibition of development outside urban settlement areas. The scale of the expansion and buildings are out of line for what's allowed on the ORM. The property is nowhere near shovel-ready and she's concerned that once approvals are given, the AFOI can sell the land to big developers. Susan Walmer, CEO at the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust, said the AFOI is, in fact, looking for a planning shortcut. The development proposed is massive and would definitely impact the rain barrel of southern Ontario, as the

ORM is known. She suggested the AFOI approach developers for the needed funds to help restore the buildings. King Township, she said, has always been an environmental champion. A representative of Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT) said the Township has had a history of processing applications in a thorough manner. The MZO, she contends, bypasses vital environmental and hydrogeological assessments. Another resident said such an MZO is an affront to a proper planning process. Councillor Bill Cober said every application, every project, is viewed differently. He's familiar with the property and said he's proud the Augustinians are part of the King community. He said he sees value in both positions and also supports seniors housing opportunities. Councillor Avia Eek said while the arguments for seniors are compelling, King's newest Official Plan puts in place certain zoning restrictions. Projects must conform to the OP, and current provincial policies, like the ORMCP. Councillor Debbie Schaefer, too, sees a need for seniors accommodation, but as an environmental champion herself, is bound by legislation like the ORMCP. Mayor Steve Pellegrini said the Township sympathizes with the Augustinians. However, King has always been about full public consultation and input. He admitted the project has merit but they would do citizens a disservice until all aspects are fully investigated. He suggested the roundtable, adding both MP Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors) and MPP Stephen Lecce have offered their support. At this point, not supporting the MZO comes down to upholding the local context of planning, which is of utmost importance, according to Councillor David Boyd.