

Heated debate over urbanizing north Pickering

Ajax councillors express opposition to development

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PICKERING -- It was passionate arguments and a packed house on Tuesday as Pickering councillors considered the issue of when lands in northeast Pickering are to be developed.

The lands are near Greenwood between concessions 7 and 8, bordered by Ajax to the south and Whitby to the east. The Region of Durham wants the lands designated for urbanization in its official plan update. However the Province has said slating the land for development is not warranted and refused to sign off on the Region's official plan.

The Region is taking the Province to the Ontario Municipal Board over the issue and Pickering councillors were considering a motion to ask the Region to drop the challenge.

More than 200 Pickering residents packed council chambers and 17 citizens spoke on the issue, including Greenwood residents who don't want to see the rural character of their community change and farmers who wanted the City to support the development. Ultimately, the motion to drop the challenge, from Regional councillors Bill McLean and Jennifer O'Connell, failed. The two councillors were joined by Regional Councillor Peter Rodrigues in voting for it while local councillors Doug Dickerson, David Pickles, Kevin Ashe and Mayor Dave Ryan opposed it.

Coun. McLean said he was disappointed at the loss and vowed this isn't the end.

"I'm sure the community will continue to fight this and I'm sure we're going to be hearing more from residents," he said.

He was supported in his position by people including Sue McInerney, who lives in north Pickering and spoke passionately about the beauty of nature in the area.

"Do we really want to see that lovely little hamlet of Greenwood essentially obliterated by development? I don't," she said.

Ajax councillor Colleen Jordan also spoke at the meeting. She said the northeast Pickering lands sit on the headwaters of the Carruthers Creek and development would cause flooding issues to residents downstream in Ajax,

pointing out that parts of south Ajax around the Carruthers Creek are already designated flood plain.

Coun. Jordan said developing the lands would put more homes at risk for flooding and would result in costly remediation efforts paid for through taxes. She said there should be a watershed study done on the area.

"I would ask the question why would you not take the (conservation authority's) advice that those studies be done before that land is designated for development?"

Coun. Jordan also responded to accusations that Ajax doesn't want the lands developed because it would hurt the Town's ability to attract jobs.

"Let's be clear our opposition is not, as some delegation have stated, for the reasons they have given, in other words to protect our own employment lands." But Coun. Pickles argued that developers must do a series of studies before putting shovels in the ground and appropriate measures would be taken to prevent flooding, pointing to similar plans for the Seaton area. He promised Ajax would be consulted.

"The two municipalities share the majority of that watershed, the two communities have to work together. I think Pickering can learn some of the lessons from Ajax," said Coun. Pickles, alluding to the flood plain issue in south Ajax.

He also pointed out that more than half of Pickering is already designated greenbelt and that the lands in question aren't included, meaning it's not a question of if the lands will be developed, but when they'll be developed.

Although only two people spoke on behalf of the farmers and land owners in northeast Pickering, it was clear about half the room supported the development after spokesman Leslie Fisher asked them all to stand up.

Donald Beach said farming in the area is no longer viable because services such as machinery sales have moved.

"Speak to the farmers themselves, there are a lot of them here, they can't make a living farming in north Pickering," he said.

He said he supported the Region's appeal.

"It struck me this evening as I heard many people waxing about the pleasures of living in the rural area ... it struck me that this is not really the issue before you tonight, that is an issue to be considered by the OMB when the process is taken to its conclusion."