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The land-use rebellion now unfolding in Markham is another skirmish in the war against the development industry.

At stake is who controls growth – government or industry?

Though some would have us believe that the end of suburbia represents a clash of cultures, an attack on middle-class virtues and market infallibility, it has more to do with wresting public powers from private hands.

Of all the myriad functions performed by local government, none is more fundamental than planning. Few would argue that the public sector's role is to set and enforce the rules by which we build our communities.

But the rise of the development industry in the postwar period brought huge pressures to bear on local politicians, whose election campaigns as often as not are bankrolled by that same industry.

And as suburbia has morphed into sprawl, developers have grown rich and powerful. When Premier Dalton McGuinty enacted Greenbelt legislation in 2005, the backlash was venomous. Perhaps because of its great success, this industry has acquired a big sense of entitlement over the decades.

In its own way, the development industry resembles the North American auto sector, which until recent economic troubles was trapped in a mindset that left it unable to keep up with the times. Just as the Big Three made billions from SUVs before demand evaporated, developers profited nicely from sprawl.

That, too, is coming to an end. For any number of reasons – environment, economy, congestion – sprawl is no longer an option. Smart developers have figured that out and responded accordingly. Others have fought tooth and nail to carry on regardless.

"It's about a shift in thinking," explains Markham Councillor Erin Shapero, who with Councillor Valerie Burke wants a permanent 2,000-hectare agricultural zone in the heart of their city. "The only naysayers are the development industry and a small percentage of farmers who still hope to sell their land. We're hoping the development industry will see this as an opportunity."

Next to this "food belt" would be a dense, mixed-use, transit-based community organized around Markham's three major arterials: Yonge St. and Highways 407 and 7.

"Food security and the need to protect the land is more and more a municipal issue," says Shapero. "Two-thirds of the Class 1 farmland in Canada is in Ontario, and almost all of it is under threat. We're lucky to have this land in our city. It's time we start thinking differently."

And according to the councillors, two of only four Markham councillors who refused developer donations to their campaigns, the people are ready for change.

"We've heard over and over from residents that they're willing to break the cycle of sprawl," Burke says. "Because of peak oil, global warming and the population explosion, we're at a critical crossroads. This unsustainable cycle can't continue. Its time is coming to an end."

As Shapero points out, it's not as if Markham doesn't already have enough single-family dwellings; fully 90 per cent of housing is low-density suburban stock. "Change is never easy," she admits, "but if we don't find a way, who will?"

Last week, Markham council agreed to consider the Shapero-Burke proposal and hold public hearings. Though unexpected, the vote is a sign of things to come. Meanwhile, the Vaughans, Bramptons, Pickering and Whitbys continue their mad rush to the brink.

"This is a bold vision but the response has been overwhelming," Burke says. "We have been made to feel we're powerless, but we're not. The direness of the situation needs out-of-the-box thinking. We have to be creative."

The fate of the plan remains to be seen. But there's really no alternative.

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