

Pickering growth plan rejected



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PICKERING -- Durham Region's plan to convert 1,200 hectares of farmland in northeast Pickering to housing for 30,000 people has been rejected by Ontario's municipal affairs ministry.

The proposed urban expansion onto valuable agricultural lands is out of step with the Province's regional growth strategy that aims to limit urban sprawl, the ministry ruled.

The decision is a victory for the Town of Ajax, which has said the development of important watershed and agricultural lands in Pickering would put Ajax at greater risk for erosion and flooding.

Environmental and agricultural groups have also warned the development of those lands would be catastrophic for the local ecosystem.

They also said it would eat into the region's best farmland.

Ajax Mayor Steve Parish said he was pleased the ministry ruled Durham must comply with Ontario's Places to Grow Act.

"They have stood by their legislation and have sent a clear message to Durham that the planning of the past is no longer acceptable and the days of sprawl have to come to an end," he said.

Durham Region has 20 days to file an appeal to the ministry to take the matter to the Ontario Municipal Board.

There are 15 new faces on the 28-member Durham Regional Council. Mayor Parish said the issue of urban expansion will test the new council.

"Will it embrace the Province's decision and will it reverse itself on northeast Pickering and not appeal it?" he said. "It (northeast Pickering) could also become a major issue in the council election process for appointing the new regional chair."

Durham Regional Chairman Roger Anderson, Pickering Mayor Dave Ryan, or a spokesperson for Durham Region couldn't be reached for comment.

The ministry's decision, released Wednesday, is consistent with the draft version sent to Durham's planning commissioner in March.

In the draft decision, the ministry said the proposed expansion into northeast Pickering undermines Ontario's "policy objective of creating compact, complete communities for future generations," and would also "undermine the Region's own efforts to make efficient use of existing land and infrastructure and build and sustain good transit services."

Durham was the only GTA Region to openly oppose the Province's greenbelt legislation in 2007. That legislation gives priority to development within cities before greenfields.

Mayor Parish said Ajax's prime concern with the proposed development of northeast Pickering, on the headwaters of Carruthers Creek, was that it would lead to increased flooding in the community.

"Without any watershed study or scientific data to what those impacts of that (urbanization) are, we were very concerned that we could have significant flooding downstream because of this urbanization," he said.

"We already have flooding issues today on the downstream portions of Carruthers Creek near Lake Ontario. We were extremely concerned this urbanization, and all the hard surfaces, including roads, would cause significantly increased runoff, erosion and flooding downstream in our municipality."

The ministry approved the majority of Durham's planning initiative that sets out the location and scope of future urban development within the region until 2031.

In addition to refusing the proposed expansion, the ministry also refused four other parts of the plan, including a proposed expansion of additional employment areas in Clarington which the ministry says "is not justified by the Growing Durham study land budget analysis."

The ministry has also asked to continue discussions with Durham Region on seven parts of its plan, including proposed urban expansions in north Whitby and north Oshawa.

-- *Megan Ogilvie is a reporter for the Toronto Star*