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Phinjo Gombu

A groundbreaking proposal to freeze Markham's urban boundary and preserve prime farmland as a permanent "food belt" is on the line after a fractious debate at a committee meeting.

Councillors voted 7-5 to support a staff recommendation to allow about half of Markham's remaining 2,000 hectares of agricultural land to be developed over the next two decades.

Whether council should petition the province to give the rest of that land permanent protection is now being studied by staff.

Six councillors — Erin Shapero, Valerie Burke, Jack Heath, Joe Virgilio, Don Hamilton and Logan Kanapathi — had hoped to pass a motion asking the province and York Region to reduce the town's population allocation (under provincial planning rules) by about 40,000 people between now and 2031.

That's the same number expected to settle in the so-called White Belt lands — areas currently zoned agricultural but which could be paved over eventually if developers have their way.

That motion, introduced by Heath and Virgilio, was defeated in a 6-6 tie, with one councillor, Jim Jones, absent. Jones is expected to be present for a final council vote May 11, when it is debated again.

"Nothing is final till it goes to council," a hopeful Shapero said afterwards. "The residents have spoken clearly that they expect their council to permanently protect farmland, curb sprawl and stop increased traffic congestion."

If that motion had passed, some councillors hoped it could either lead to freezing expansion long enough to make adequate public transit a reality — and help curb sprawl — or result in all 2,000 hectares of Markham's White Belt lands being given permanent "food belt" designation by the province.

A subsequent motion to freeze the city's urban boundary even without a population reduction was defeated 7-5, with Kanapathi switching sides to vote alongside Mayor Frank Scarpitti, John Webster, Don Horchik, Gordon Langdon, Carolina Moretti and Alex Chiu.

Under the staff proposal, about 60 per cent of Markham's future growth would be accommodated through intensification, significantly higher than many other GTA municipalities.

Freezing the city's urban borders without reducing the population target would mean 100 per cent of Markham's future growth would need to take place through infill development. Other GTA cities' plans would see only 40 to 50 per cent of their future growth occur through infill.

A centrepiece of Tuesday's debate was whether Markham, already on its way to becoming one of the densest communities in the GTA, could handle any more outward growth. About 90,000 new residents are expected to find homes there through intensification by 2031.

Heath and Virgilio said expanding any more without an ironclad commitment to more transit funding from the province would only lead to more traffic congestion on the roads. Their opponents called a freeze unrealistic, given how many people arrive in the GTA every year. Many of them prefer single-family detached homes, they said.

Scarpitti said Markham has to take its fair share of the growth.

"My children don't want to buy a condo, they want to buy a house with a piece of grass," added Langdon.



Markham Councillors Valerie Burke, left, and Erin Shapero, pictured in January on farmland within the town of Markham, have been working for months on a plan to preserve a large area as a permanent "food belt."

Lucas Oleniuk/Toronto Star

Chiu argued that freezing expansion would drive housing prices up, making it even harder for new arrivals to buy homes.

"Homes used to be cheap," said Chiu. "They're not cheap anymore ... Even the smallest ones are close to \$1 million. I don't want to see us close the door on new immigrants."