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A controversial Markham plan to become the first GTA municipality to freeze expansion on prime farmland to make way for a permanent food belt has been narrowly defeated after one last debate at council that ended late Tuesday.

The final 7-6 vote in support of a staff proposal to expand onto the so-called white belt that lies outside the urban boundary and the provincially protected Greenbelt came after hours of debate and hundreds of presentations and meetings over the past few years.

The critical vote in support of expansion came from regional Councillor Jim Jones, who was absent for a crucial 6-6 tie vote that supporters of the food belt recently lost.

That motion called for Markham to request the province to ask York Region and the province to reduce Markham's population allocation by about 40,000, the same number of people slated to be housed through an urban expansion.

"I am for a balanced approach," said Jones.

He was echoing the sentiments of Mayor Frank Scarpitti, who argued that Markham could not support a policy of intensification alone over the next 20 years.

The heated debate has pitted environmentalists and those who believe that more outward sprawl, without an accompanying investment of transit infrastructure is a recipe for more gridlock, against those who believe that growth is inevitable and must be managed and planned for.

At stake is the remaining 2,000 hectares of prime agricultural land, considered the best in Canada, which lies in the white belt and is the

focus of battles between environmentalists and developers.

Tuesday's vote means that about 1,000 hectares will be developed, while the remaining 1,000 hectares of white belt land will be the subject of study by town staff on whether it should be included in a Greenbelt expansion request to the province.

"Traffic and taxes both go up with urban expansion," warned Jim Robb of the Rouge Duffins Greenspace Coalition, urging Markham council to become the first GTA city to stop sprawl dead in its tracks.

He was supported in his call by environmentalist David Suzuki, several residents groups and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

Others such as Meg Stokes of the Angus Glen Ratepayers Association said that Markham needed both intensification and some expansion on to agricultural land.

"We need balance today, tomorrow and 20 years from now," said Stokes, pointing out that residents are as concerned about intensification alone as a means to accommodate growth, as they are about sprawl.

Others favouring expansion included Stephen Dupuis of BILD, a group that represents GTA builders, a lawyer for farmer-owners of land and Don Given who represents a number of developers in north Markham.

Before Tuesday night, Jones said he was in favour of expansion, although with strict conditions involving the implementation of public transit before development was allowed.

The staff proposal will see about 60 per cent of Markham's future growth accommodated through intensification, significantly higher than many other GTA municipalities.

About 90,000 new residents (besides the 40,000 slated to go on farmland) are expected to move into Markham between now and 2031, through a mixture of intensification projects such as the Langstaff Gateway and Markham City Centre.

There also remains a limited supply of traditional green field within the urban boundary.

Some believe the transit conditions that formed part of the final motion could result in future battles by food belt supporters to restrict when growth can occur on agricultural land. Others say it won't stop developers from going to the Ontario Municipal Board to demand more concessions.

Those who supported expansion were Scarpitti, Dan Horchik, John Webster, Alex Chiu, Carolina Moretti, Gordon Landon and Jones. Councillors opposed were Erin Shapero, Valerie Burke, Don Hamilton, Jack Heath, Joseph Virgilio and Logan Kanapathi.