

FRANKLY SPEAKING: Locked out

Locked out of Town Hall

By MPP Frank Klees

I thought I had experienced it all, but after 18 years as an MPP, the powers that be at the Town of Newmarket served up another first for me. It was just another reminder that politics is not for the thin-skinned.

In my last column, I wrote about my Private Members Bill that, if passed, will amend the Places to Grow Act and the Planning Act to give municipalities the final say when it comes to development applications that propose to increase the number of housing units in an existing residential community.

The genesis of this Bill is a commitment I made to the residents of Newmarket's Glenway community during the last election. They are facing the threat of major intensification of their community through the addition of more than 700 additional housing units. The impact on the quality of life of the residents will be significant, not to mention the effect on property values.

Under current provincial policy, even if Newmarket Council denies the application, the developer can appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board and the odds are that the developer will win the day. So, what is the impact of my proposed Bill?

For one, Newmarket Council would have the final say about the redevelopment application for the Glenway community, not the Ontario Municipal Board. Second, municipalities across the province would have the same authority under similar circumstances; an idea that would be enthusiastically welcomed, I thought.

An unexpected reaction

Having tabled my Preserving Existing Communities Act for First Reading in the Legislature, I was looking forward to making the details public. What better place to have a press conference to announce the good news than at the Newmarket Town Hall. After all, this has to be welcome news to the Mayor and Council.

I instructed my staff to issue a media advisory for 7 p.m. the next evening and to confirm the arrangements with the Town offices. What happened next was totally unexpected. My staff was told that the Town of Newmarket offices would not be available for my press conference. When I personally followed up with the Mayor himself, he advised me that given the matter had not yet been before Council, they didn't want anyone to conclude that either he or Newmarket Council was endorsing my Bill because I was holding a press conference there.

As the media advisory had already gone out, and not wanting to confuse the issue further, I advised the Mayor that I would have to go ahead with the press conference as announced. I assured him that I would make a point of letting everyone know that the location of the announcement does not imply the Mayor or Council supports the Bill. My hope was that given the inclement weather, surely we would at least be given access to the foyer.

Not so. I conducted the press conference in front of the locked doors of the Town Hall in -5 degree temperature and a shivering audience that included the Mayor of Aurora, Newmarket Councillors Chris Emanuel, Jane Twinney and John Taylor.

Also in attendance were representatives from the Glenway Preservation Association, who I assumed would be supportive of my Bill. That remains to be seen.

A welcome ally for my Bill

While my press conference was relegated to the elements and my Bill is being viewed with fear and trembling by the very people it was intended to help in my own riding, a motion was passed unanimously by the City of Mississauga Council the next day endorsing the principle my Bill is proposing.

Mayor Hazel McCallion was quoted in the Toronto Star as saying, "They can't be playing around with our land use like they do" referring to the province and the OMB. "I am really concerned about the increased densities....our infrastructure is not designed to take the increased densities.?"

I welcome Mayor McCallion's support and that of Mississauga Council. It was encouraging to see the quick and positive response to my Bill and will hope for similar support from the Councils in the communities I represent.

Leading that support to date are Newmarket Councillors Chris Emanuel and Jane Twinney who have both expressed their support publicly. I'll be watching with interest how Council deals with the matter.

Aurora Mayor Geoffrey Dawe acknowledged that his Council could be facing similar intensification pressures in the future and that my Bill could have significant implications

for Aurora. I appreciated him attending the press conference and look forward to working with him and Aurora Council to protect the quality of life in our communities.

Anyone wanting to attend the debate on the Preserving Existing Communities Act on April 18 or sign the petition in support of the Bill, should contact my office at 905-750-0019, or through my website at www.franklees.com.