

Mayor touts Aurora as hub of innovation while taking aim at Province



People are starting to see Aurora as "a serious player in the innovation ecosystem," said Mayor Tom Mrakas at his annual "State of the Town" lunch, hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce last week.

Speaking before a packed house at the Royal Venetian Mansion on February 22, Mayor Mrakas said the state of the Town was "strong" and "getting back to thriving after a challenging three years." But as much as there has been a bounce-back after the height of the global pandemic, communities like Aurora are facing challenges from Queen's Park, he cautioned.

Speaking before a crowd of local business leaders, as well as MPs Tony Van Bynen and Leah Taylor Roy, members of Council, the Mayors of Newmarket and Richmond Hill, and York Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson, Mrakas said Aurora is home to more than 2,000 businesses, "the vast majority small business owners and grassroots entrepreneurs."

"The diversity of our business community is something that has always made us great," he said, noting a variety of new businesses that have opened in Aurora over the last 12 months. "I've had the pleasure to meet all these business owners and so many more, and I'm inspired by their courage to follow their dreams of owning and operating a business, and I'm so thankful they've chosen Aurora and are creating good jobs in our community."

Businesses, he added, are also choosing Aurora because of "the incredible talent we have" [with] more than 75 per cent of residents having a post-secondary degree "far higher than the provincial average."

Megalab Group, for instance, cited as an "innovative company that provides cutting-edge product testing, opened its doors in Aurora last year, while Piramal Pharma Solutions expanded its Aurora footprint. Mining vehicle manufacturer Kovatera opened a research and development facility in the community "to focus on the development of electric vehicle powertrain and autonomous vehicle systems, while others have planted roots in Aurora to expand manufacturing.

Another development in 2022 was the signing of a new memorandum of understanding between the Town of Aurora and York University to "partner on key sustainability initiatives and the development of leading-edge technologies, including smart-community technologies."

"Partnerships like these send a strong signal that as a municipality we are committed to fostering an innovation ecosystem; that innovators can come to Aurora to pilot new technologies, scale-up and compete on the global market," said Mrakas. "A huge priority for myself and Council is working hard to ensure there's ample industrial and office space in Town to accommodate new

businesses. One of the projects I'm so proud we strongly endorsed is the Wellington East Business Centre. The planned 80,000 square-foot office condo by developers Howland Green will use advanced building techniques and technologies to actually conserve resources and preserve more energy than it consumes. It's truly amazing. These are the types of innovative spaces that innovative people and companies want to work from. We're also seeing huge progress at the 32-acre SmartCentres South development which is now home to HomeSense, Winners and the much-anticipated Farm Boy, with its own family-farm connection to Aurora.

But what's critical now is that we build on this momentum. So, to bolster our Economic Development Strategic Plan that runs its course at the end of this year, we are now working on an Aurora 2030 Action Plan, that will include even more targeted efforts to help businesses grow and expand, and bring new investment to Town. But just as fast as we're building new businesses and supports, we're also putting measures in place to protect and strengthen the character of our Town, especially in our downtown core. Policies such as our updated Official Plan, with an updated Promenade Plan, aims to ensure new builds and renovations adhere to the consistent look that respects and complements our architectural heritage. Now, we know that this is important to both residents and businesses, and is part of our larger economic strategy. Distinct and beautiful downtowns are an incredible source of pride and also attract more residents, small business owners and investment.

Yet, it's integral to plan for future growth and Mrakas said the revised OP will provide the road map to ensure our downtown is ready to embrace new technologies like autonomous vehicles, while also planning for more residential housing.

And here's where Mayor Mrakas said recent Provincial legislation might prove a roadblock on the previously mentioned roadmap. While he said that he and some in attendance might have had a different perspective on housing, he said if we want to continue attracting new residents and businesses, we need to prioritize building more housing through strategic growth.

We're committed to leveraging the tools available to us to create a variety of more affordable housing options, including town houses, stacked duplexes and more. And just yesterday (February 21), I put forward a motion at General Committee to ensure our Official Plan includes an Affordable Housing Action Plan that has modernized housing policies that clearly defines strategies and actions to create more affordable and attainable housing to 2051 and beyond.

We are fully committed to playing our part to address the housing and affordability crisis that has swept the country. But I want to be very clear on something today: Aurora has enough space to meet the accelerated provincial growth targets without encroaching on environmentally protected land. The Greenbelt is vital to the ecological health of the Region and Aurorans care about the environment. As a Council and a community, we are committed to ensuring responsible housing growth. In support of that commitment, Town Council unanimously passed a motion that opposes the province's plan to redesignate or remove 330 hectares of protected Greenbelt land in York Region for urban development. This is in line with many of our other climate initiatives such as our Corporate Environmental Action Plan, Climate Adaptation Plan, Community Energy Plan and Green Development Standards all aimed at protecting our environment and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent from 2018 levels by the year 2050. So, I do not support any policy initiative provincial or federal that threatens environmentally sensitive lands.

We also won't stay silent as the province severely limits our ability to plan our own communities. I support the province's goal of creating 1.5 million new homes over the next decade, but they have continually put forward a false narrative that municipalities are the main culprits of the housing crisis, a narrative they've used to impose a one-size-fits-all approach to local land-use planning across Ontario.

The Province's legislation, he continued, limits or eliminates a municipality's ability to control certain aspects of development, such as architectural design, limits the ability of Conservation Authorities to weigh in on the environmental impacts of a proposal, and reduces or eliminates the ability of towns and cities to levy development charges to builders to account for infrastructure and programs that will be stressed by incoming growth.

This, said Mayor Mrakas, could result in millions of dollars of lost revenue necessary to maintain current service levels.

The burden will shift to our residents and our businesses through higher, massive [property] taxes, he warned. Taken as whole,

all of this increasingly means that the Town's Official Plan is becoming not even worth the paper that it's written on . . . Official Plans that we have spent hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars developing, and importantly, reflects the vision of our residents and our businesses. As I have said before, municipalities are at the forefront of planning ? we are the ones on the ground and we see the direct impact land use planning decisions have on our community. That's why we need to have a say in how, where or even if we grow.

?As your Mayor, I have always been and will continue to be a fierce advocate for greater municipal autonomy in land use planning decisions.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter