

Ontario needs 'appeal mechanism' for planning, says PC leader Brown

By Brock Weir

Ontario Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown was on familiar turf when he toured Aurora late last month with Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor John Abel.

The Barrie MPP spent three summers in Aurora between 2003 to 2005 working for Magna International at their Wellington Street headquarters and by the time he arrived at the Aurora Farmers' Market on July 22, he realised not that much has changed.

'Aurora has been very successful with maintaining that small town charm,' he told The Auroran at the time.

But is that 'small town charm' under threat? That is a question that has repeatedly come up in public forums over the last few years in Aurora as the Town inches closer to intensification along the Yonge and Wellington Corridors and, most prominently, with the proposal to redevelop the former Highland Gate Golf Course into a 180+ housing development and 10-storey condominium complex, which is now before the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB).

Councillors Tom Mrakas and Michael Thompson have led the charge to bring significant reforms to the OMB and while Mr. Brown says he has 'frustrations' with the OMB, he does not believe it should be consigned to the history books.

'One of my frustrations with the OMB is it takes so long and is so costly,' says Mr. Brown. 'You talk about the red tape of Ontario and you're talking about decisions being delayed years. Whether you're talking about a developer or someone opposing a development, to be in limbo for that long is not helpful. I want to create a culture of investment in Ontario where you want to be here, you want to invest here, and if we get viewed as a place where we are indecisive or unpredictable that is not helpful.'

'I wouldn't want to get rid of the OMB. I think you definitely need to have an appeal mechanism, but I would like a way to expedite the timelines of decisions with mandated time periods that hearings and decisions have to be embarked upon.'

Having spent two years as a municipal councillor in the City of Barrie, Mr. Brown says the experience brought him some insights in the challenges towns and cities face ensuring they have a voice in how they grow and develop. It is important, he says, for municipalities to have that say and role in their own development, but that comes with striking a balance.

'You have to look at what is in the best interest of the Province and the best interest of the city and that is why I think having an appeal mechanism can balance that,' says Mr. Brown. What I would hope is I find the OMB, because they are appointed politically, sometimes you have appointments that are purely patronage appointments and that is not helpful, where there are people on the OMB simply because they are good Liberal fundraisers and the number of cases that have obviously been written about.

'People who are experts in planning, experts in community building, if there was less of a partisan body and more of a body of experts in the field, I think we would be better served.'

Many instances of these intensification and infill projects, however, are governed by targets set out by the Province of Ontario in Places to Grow legislation. Mr. Brown says this legislation has its 'problems' as there can't be one 'cookie cutter' solution that works in every community.

What may work in downtown Toronto probably won't work in communities like Aurora and Barrie, he says.

'In Barrie, we have density targets that we want to hit, so it is encouraging more apartment buildings, more condo buildings, but in some cases, if you are moving from Toronto up to Barrie, you don't want to live in an apartment building; you might want to live in your home,' he says. 'I think we need to be more flexible in allowing municipalities to have a greater voice and [determine] what the marketplace is in their community.'

?Frankly, in Aurora, there are many people who are moving up here from Toronto who don't want to live in an apartment building; they want to live in their own home. If I was to re-look at Places to Grow, it would be to offer more flexibility and a greater municipal voice in that, and some of the targets there should have some flexibility.?