
Rural Official Plan delayed

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06/30/06 00:00:00

Hamilton's proposed new rural official plan received a lukewarm reception from politicians and residents this week.

Despite assurances from city planning staff that the harmonized ROP will protect Hamilton's farmland, politicians wanted more time to review the impact such a document will have on the rural community.

"The implications of this are far-reaching," said Flamborough councillor Margaret McCarthy. "I'm concerned about what it will open up between the old (document) and the new."

Members of the planning and economic development committee agreed to delay approving the document until September, so that further research can be conducted on a number of issues.

Councillors wanted city planning staff to investigate:

- establishing precise boundaries in the Winona area;
- allowing some development in the Greensville area;
- allowing property on the mountain to be included in the urban area rather than the rural area;
- including more diversification of businesses in the rural areas
- preventing any quarry expansion until proper aggregate mapping is done.

City planning staff have been preparing a new harmonized rural official plan to merge the former six municipalities' official plans, since 2003.

The idea, said City planner Michelle Sergi, is to provide a secure land base for farming uses, and make agricultural uses on the land a priority. But there are complications for the city's rural area. There are about 44,000 people living in rural Hamilton, a far greater number than what should be expected, said Sergi.

The high population has contributed to creating a siege mentality within the agricultural area as suburban sprawl and development encroach further into rural properties, said city staff.

There are only about 1,050 working farms in the area, and about 4,000 farmers or farm residents within the population.

The rural community has been under intense pressure from such developments as quarry operators in Flamborough that want to open an aggregate business; farmers who are unable to profit from their land sometimes opt to establish businesses that are contrary to zoning bylaws to survive; and Hamilton has one of the highest severance application approval rates in Southern Ontario, creating a patchwork of farm properties across the city. Rural councillors estimate there could be as many as 600 illegal businesses operating in the rural areas.

Flamborough councillor Dave Braden has stated the proposed ROP will constrain residents in rural areas as to what type of home-based businesses they can operate.

Glanbrook councillor Dave Mitchell said rural residents in his area are worried about their ability to sever their farm property, and how the greenbelt legislation will affect local land-use changes.

McCarthy was focused on the aggregate mapping issue. She has been fighting a proposed aggregate operation in Flamborough for the last two years. She was satisfied when planning staff told her a new aggregate map could take about three years, and maybe longer, to complete.

"I'm concerned about going forward with antiquated documents," she said. "We need accurate maps.

Under the ROP, new aggregate operations or an expansion will be allowed if they are located within the Potential Mineral Aggregate Resource Area, specific areas where new pits and quarries are permitted.

During this week's public meeting, Roy Shuker, chair of the Agricultural and Rural Affairs Advisory Committee, provided one of the few positive comments among the estimated 15 people who appeared before the committee, about the document.

The ROP, he said, re-emphasizes the farmers' right to farm their land and allows for non-farm uses to be established in settlement areas.

Settlement areas, under the ROP, are 18 communities identified in Hamilton's rural community, such as Greensville. The ROP, as city planning staff stated, follows the province's greenbelt legislation.

"This provides us with a level playing field across the rural area," said Shuker. "It will allow for farm diversification."

Graham Flint, chair of the anti-quarry group FORCE, said he was disappointed with the document. He expected planning staff to create a "made-in-Hamilton" plan, but instead it is "no better, and no worse" than what was in force before.

"It's just different," he said.

Paul Mason, director of long-range planning, did point out that once the rural official plan is approved by council, it will be sent to the Municipal Affairs Ministry for provincial approval. The minister must respond to the document after 180 days. During that time, people can appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board if they have any disagreements with the document.

Councillors were expected to approve the planning committee's recommendation at their June 28 council meeting.