

Environmentalists, regional council share concerns about growth plan

Halton is becoming one big real estate development in the eyes of resident Tom Muir.

The Burlington resident was among eight other delegates at a recent regional council meeting who pleaded for local politicians to build a more ecologically sound future for Halton residents.

Representatives from several environmental groups also voiced support for Oakville Councillor Allan Elgar's request that staff determine exactly how many more people and houses the region can accommodate without "degradation of air quality, human health and growing threats to the ecological fabric of our landscape."

It received unanimous approval from council.

Activist Leslie Adams of Sustainable Halton Hills even offered free consulting services to help hammer out a workable solution, as did Kurt Koster of Burlingtongreen.

Delegates also approached council in light of a recent report released by the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, Gord Miller, that said, "...our existing planning processes cannot protect ecosystems while accommodating the growing demands for infrastructure, roads and water."

In turn, council asked the people who approached the microphone for their help in convincing the provincial and federal government to rethink its Places to Grow Plan. It demands that Halton make room for twice as many people over 30 years. By 2031 the region is expected to accommodate 780,000 people and 390,000 jobs.

According to Oakville Green Conservation Association President Liz Benneian, "doubling our current population can't be accomplished without significantly deteriorating our natural environment and the health and quality of the life of Halton's citizens. As it stands, what we are doing is too little, in too unco-ordinated a fashion, without a true

understanding of where we're starting from."

Conserving farmland, water and energy, as well as improving air quality must be paramount to future planning, said Erika Ristok, a resident of Oakville who works in Milton and Oakville.

"Like everywhere else Halton Region is trying to have its cake and eat it too. Gassing up the car, commuting to work and picking up grapes from Chile in the grocery store are not workable in the not so far future," added Ristok.

Sustainable development, as described by the World Commission on the Environment and Development, is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own.

That means figuring out the minimum forest cover and wetland area needed to sustain a healthy ecosystem with healthy air and watershed and using minimum arable land for sustainable agricultural industry to provide food for its own residents.

"If we make the wrong choice our societies will collapse and our very existence as a species will be threatened," said Roger Goulet, who spoke on behalf of the group called Protecting Escarpment Rural Land (PERL).

In determining Halton's capacity to host more residents, its ecological footprint must be determined, as well as where and how much to grow, said Goulet.

Phase one of the Sustainable Halton process, which began in May 2006, produced 22 technical and background reports analyzing land supply, housing directions, air quality and transportation, water and waster water infrastructure, as well as energy demand and supply. Three more phases of the review and consultation process will follow in 2008-09.

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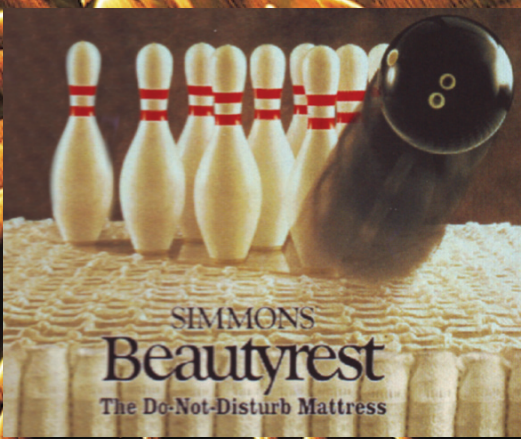
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