

REGIONAL NEWS: Growth must stop until services catch up, officials say at Georgina retreat

Region growth may grind to halt: politicians

BY LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITER

York Region politicians are considering halting development until services can catch up with growth.

The idea of taking such drastic action surfaced at a \$6,000 private retreat at the Briars resort in Georgina last Thursday and Friday.

Councillors agreed services, including public transit, schools and hospitals, are struggling to keep up with growth and provincial funding cuts.

"In my 10 years (as a municipal politician), I've never seen such a willingness to close the gap between when residents move here and when services kick in," Markham Councillor Frank Scarpitti said at the conclusion of the retreat.

But the politicians are divided over how far to go to deal with the challenges.

While some advocate stopping growth now, others say that's too extreme, at least for the time being.

In the end, councillors agreed to hold a symposium early next year where all stakeholders — politicians, hospital and school officials, developers and community groups — can discuss gaps in services and what can be done about the problem.

According to Aurora Mayor Tim Jones, the symposium could be the first step in halting development until services can catch up.

"I think it's a step leading to that kind of action. I think it's worth taking a look at," he said.

"We're not threatening anything right now but we're looking in that direction. It's a start of saying 'we're feeling this (growth) pressure and we don't see a way where we can be OK with it'."

York's population is expected to reach 1.1 million by 2021, up from today's total of 665,000.

According to Jones, councillors are particularly worried about crammed emergency rooms and the number of portables being built on school properties — services that are outside the region's control.

That's why councillors want the symposium, to bring other groups to the table to talk about strategies such as stopping growth.

But even regional services — especially transit and road construction — are lagging behind.

"We have to make sure we don't in 10 years find ourselves in absolute gridlock," Jones said.

He admitted halting development would be a controversial move.

"I don't think it will be popular amongst those who are developing. I think it will be popular amongst those who live in municipalities that are growing, like Aurora."

However, Jones argued politicians can't just allow development to proceed unchecked.

"It (growth) is just a problem, it's just a situation we can't keep up with," he said.

"Hopefully, it will help us put more pressure to make sure schools and hospitals are

built before people move here. These are not amenities, these are necessities."

Markham Mayor Don Cousens agreed the lack of services — in particular, the shortage of ambulances in his town — is a serious concern.

But he said stopping development is too extreme, at least as an initial move.

Cousens suggested negotiations between the various players and putting conditions on developers to ensure they provide services as they

are needed.

"If that fails, we can move to harsher, stronger measures."

Cousens blamed the province's new development charges policy — a compromise worked out last year after mayors across the Greater Toronto Area threatened to stop growth — for the lack of services in fast-growth regions.

For example, it is illegal to charge development fees — the taxes on new construction

to pay for infrastructure — to pay for hospitals.

But that leaves councillors lobbying Queen's Park for money the province claims it doesn't have.

At the retreat, councillors also agreed to:

- explore the idea of central dispatch for police, fire and ambulances
- continue working toward regionally integrated fire and transit services
- find garbage disposal solutions.

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Pope John Paul II may visit region

BY LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITER

Pope John Paul II may hold the final day of a Canadian Catholic youth conference in King City.

The event, slated for summer 2002, would be held on the grounds of St. Mary's monastery, an Augustinian order of priests and brothers.

According to Father Eugene Tramble, the Vatican will decide by May whether to hold the conference in Toronto or Africa.

If Toronto wins out, St. Mary's has a good chance of being selected to host the final day.

The monastery sits on 800 acres and is home to Mary Lake, a shrine, pilgrimage centre and retreat house.

The site also has the advantage of being near Hwy. 400 on Keele Street. Hundreds, possibly thou-

sands, of people would attend the gathering.

Although he's excited about the possibility of the Pope coming, Tramble doesn't want to appear over-enthusiastic.

"It's being investigated. It could end up in Timbuktu or on Mars, for that matter."

But Mayor Margaret Black said Bishop Anthony Meagher told her yesterday the monastery would be an ideal location.

"His exact words were, 'King City has a good chance,'" she said.

"It's not sure but it's looking very positive."

According to Black, Meagher said the Canadian conference of Catholic bishops has recommended St. Mary's, but the final decision rests with the Vatican. The Pope last visited Toronto in 1984.

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