

Kevin
Thomason
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Presentation to Town of Markham Council
February 16, 2010
Public Information Meeting
Markham Growth Management Strategy

Honourable Mayor, Members of Council, and Guests,

My name is Kevin Thomason and I live at 1115 Cedar Grove Road in Waterloo, Ontario where I've worked extensively on the Region of Waterloo Growth Management Plan. However, I am also a citizen of Markham at 29 Kirk Drive, Thornhill, Ontario and still reside here at least one or two nights each week.

I was born here, I attended Baythorn and Thornlea Schools, and I still sit on several local Boards of Directors for Thornhill non-profit organizations.

Both Waterloo and Markham are successful communities and there are many parallels however, though there is one area where the City of Waterloo is already ahead of Markham - - we are about to run out of land.

Urban Issues and Opportunities

The City of Waterloo has only a couple of hundred acres of undeveloped land left and within a couple of years the City will be fully built out to the City limits on every side with no new development land left for houses, businesses, or industrial parks.

The surrounding rural townships have made it clear that there will be no more sprawl, they will not be annexed (like what just happened in Barrie) and the Mennonites will not be driven off their farms simply so the City of Waterloo can continue to sprawl and grow unsustainably.

At first there was panic in our community. How will we survive if we run out of land!

However, Manhattan, London, Sydney - even Toronto have all run out of land and yet they are some of the most thriving, desirable places to live in the world.

This is not a tragedy or a crisis but an opportunity - chance to be world-class, live sustainably, and set an example. We all know our current ways are unsustainable, and be it overpopulation, global warming, or peak oil, that we are going to have to change in the future.

Already, in Waterloo the City Planners are adapting, our developers are changing, and there has been a shift away from distant suburbs to a totally rejuvenated city core. Our downtown has gone from run down, to a thriving area of new shops, offices, apartments, seniors homes, a new public square, and has become the focal point of the community again for the first time in generations.

The shift has been so dramatic that many of our old developers now sit with unsold lots and planners have twice had to extend the date that they predicted we would run out of land.

While the Greenfield developments sit unsold, new mixed-use developments, townhomes, and factory loft retrofits uptown have sold-out within hours and have waiting lists for any units that become available. We now have more than a dozen substantial core projects underway - amazing mixed new European style office and retail shoppes, homes, and fabulous new public spaces where people want to spend time and socialize with other community members.

There is even a new LRT transit system being planned for Waterloo which could make us one of the smallest cities in the world with rapid transit. With good public transit, a desirable core, walkable neighbourhoods, new cafes and new theatres - research institutes, leading businesses, and start-ups are flocking to our community.

Rural Issues and Opportunities

We actually have the best of both world's though, because the visionary Growth Plan of the Region of Waterloo is also protecting thousands of acres of our Moraine and natural areas through the precedent setting Environmentally Sensitive Landscape concept.

Additionally, the new Countryside Line designation is a European concept that is being adopted by Waterloo Region that sets firm urban boundaries to ensure our farms and rural areas have the long-term protection they need to be able to invest in their agricultural operations and ensure future generations can continue to farm.

Thus, we have a vibrant city adjacent to a thriving countryside. We all love our local markets, the famous Waterloo Farmer's market, and local farm gate sales. I easily eat a 100 mile diet, enjoying local beef, organic yogurt and ice cream, fresh fruits, berries, eggs, and bread that I purchase fresh from farms just minutes from my house.

The Foodbelt concept being proposed for Markham is brilliant and could accomplish similar dynamic of a leading-edge city and adjacent thriving farms complimenting each other and creating an amazing quality of life for both.

I find it absurd that any farming organization that claims to be about successful agriculture would be against the Foodbelt. Most of our Waterloo farms are less than 100 acres and are family run.

As for the needs of retiring farmers - successful farms in Waterloo sell for good, fair prices just like they have for generations in the prairies and elsewhere across Canada.

Provincial Growth Targets

It is our responsibility to ensure that our communities are sustainable and that we be able to grow the food and produce the energy we will need in the future.

It's unfair that the province has targeted some communities for significant future growth well beyond the sustainable carrying capacity of the land, while other communities are predicting no growth or even declining populations.

Existing residents have seen increased traffic congestion, declining air quality, loss of greenspace, and a declining quality of life. Future growth must be balanced, must be sustainable and must increase, not decrease the quality of life for anyone. Perhaps the Ontario government needs to create incentives for people to settle in Chatham, Sudbury, Cornwall, or elsewhere.

In Conclusion

I applaud the Town of Markham Planners and Staff for their preferred growth option, however, recent polls have made it clear that the vast majority of Markham's citizens want to see even a better balance to growth and want the Foodbelt created.

This growth plan will determine if Markham will become a world-class, sustainable community, or if it will become just another non-descript, sprawling suburb with a questionable future in an increasingly energy-constrained world.

Don't let the province or a group of developers dictate your future. Running out of land is eventually inevitable with traditional urban sprawl. Act now while you can still have a balance.

Be bold. Be visionary. Do what you will be proudest, to show your grand-children in thirty years, and create the Foodbelt, an enhanced Greenbelt, and a balanced community with one of the highest qualities of life in the world.

Thank you,

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