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- LEGAL MATTERS
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- AUTOMOTIVE
- CONTESTS
- EVENTS
- LETTERS
- READERS CHOICE
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- DELIVERY QUESTIONS
- IN YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD
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HOME NEWS SPORTS WHAT'S ON OPINION COMMUNITY OBITUARIES AUTOS CLASSIFIEDS REAL ESTATE SHOPPING JOBS



Home > News > Climbing official plan costs in Vaughan have...



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Climbing official plan costs in Vaughan have councillor concerned

Vaughan Citizen
By Adam Martin-Robbins

The city has spent approximately \$18 million developing and implementing its official plan and that amount is expected to climb as dozens of appeals by landowners have yet to be settled. That revelation has at least one councillor seeing red.

"This is like the city hall (cost overrun) fiasco all over again. You give one number out to the public and then surprise, surprise now it's multi-millions more," said Maple/Kleinburg Councillor Marilyn lafrate, noting that she expected the number to be closer to \$7 million or \$8 million.

"I felt betrayed when I read it. ... I was not expecting this nor was there any indication that's how far out of whack this had gone, and we still don't have a fully adopted official plan."

lafrate was reacting to a report that shows between 2007 and 2015 the city spent about \$18 million for a range of costs related to Vaughan Official Plan 2010, which guides where and, in some cases, when different types of development — industrial, commercial and various types of housing — will be allowed in the city up to 2031.

The largest expenditure, an estimated \$10.1 million, was for internal labour costs including policy planning, development planning, parks development and legal services, according to the report.

Approximately \$6.9 million went toward the official plan as well as the related studies, secondary plans and design guidelines it contains.

Another \$1.2 million went to dealing with Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) appeals and external legal services.

lafrate said she's concerned that given there still are dozens of appeals to be dealt with the city could wind up spending millions more.

And she noted a recent decision by the majority of council, against the advice of city planning staff and a "strong" warning from the provincial government, to postpone adoption into the official plan of an updated map for the Natural Heritage Network (NHN), environmentally significant or sensitive areas to be protected from development, is generating more appeals.

"It's the bottomless pit OP (official plan)," lafrate said. "We just keep throwing money in there and money in there."

City staff provided some reasons for the rising costs at a finance committee meeting Monday.

John MacKenzie, deputy city manager of planning and growth management, said one factor is that Vaughan is growing rapidly and developers are responding to changing demands in the housing market.

He also noted it's relatively easy to file an OMB appeal so some developers will do it simply to "buy time" until they figure out what they want to do with their land.

Another factor, is the size, scope and complexity of the official plan, especially as it relates to the new downtown core, known as the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, being built around the future subway station in the Jane Street and Hwy. 7 area, MacKenzie said.

"I think that's part of the magnitude of the costs and challenges that we're facing here related to the fact that it's a bold city building opportunity and there are extensive issues that you have to address as part of it," he said.

There have also been some protracted battles in areas earmarked for intensification where some developers are bringing forward applications for condominium or townhouse complexes and residents are staunchly opposed, he added.

Those explanations appeared to satisfy some councillors who attended the meeting — Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua, Deputy Mayor Michael Di Biase, Tony Carella (Woodbridge West), Rosanna DeFrancesca (Woodbridge East) and Alan Shefman (Thornhill).

"We had to start over from scratch and that is a monumental process that we're not yet at the end of, but take heart we will get there some day," Carella said. "And about a week later, we'll have to start on a review, but, hey, that's the way it is, unfortunately."

DeFrancesca, meanwhile, said the official plan is meant to provide a vision for how the city will grow, but it's subject to change.

"It's a live document, constantly moving, and that's why we have appeals and changes and OP applications and amendments," she said. "Yes, it's a vision, but there's so many things at play. We have a market that we have to deal with and the market has changed significantly in the last five years and we have to be cognizant of that. ... Yes, we have to defend our OP (official plan), but we also have a responsibility to the public to develop because development gives us DCs (development charges) and development gives us taxes - empty land gives us nothing."

But lafrate says she's not sure how to justify the growing price tag to residents given the official plan, in many areas of the city, hasn't prevented some developers from building projects that are contrary to what the plan envisions.

"We need to stop bleeding the taxpayers because taxpayers aren't seeing any benefit to this," she said.

City solicitor Heather Wilson said staff are trying to mitigate future costs by negotiating settlements with landowners who have filed appeals to avoid a more expensive OMB hearing.

Bob Klein, a Kleinburg and Area Ratepayers' Association director, says that's not always the best approach, especially in the case of the village since the OMB already approved official plan policies regulating development there.

"Every time you compromise, you lower the bar," he said.

Nick Pinto, president of the West Woodbridge Homeowners Association, said he wasn't completely surprised by the \$18 million price tag, but it still concerns him.

"We need to hold their feet to the fire. This is not acceptable," he said. "Enough of taxpayers money being pushed out the window."

City hall watcher Richard Lorello also expressed "outrage" in a letter sent to councillors after the report was posted online last week.

"Residents continue to be threatened by development that is not compatible within their existing neighbourhoods in which they have lived and enjoyed for decades," he wrote. "That said we now wake up this morning to the deeply disturbing City of Vaughan report that taxpayers will pay in excess of \$18 million for a document that fails to protect our interests and where costs continue to mount."

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