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Town of Aurora

General Committee Report

No. PDS20-031

Subject: Regional MCR Update: Employment Land Conversions and Employment Land Mapping in Aurora

Prepared by: Michael Logue, Senior Policy Planner

Department: Planning and Development Services

Date: November 17, 2020

Recommendation

1. That Report No. PDS20-031 be received for information.

Executive Summary

This report seeks to update Council on land-owner initiated employment land conversion requests and Regional employment land mapping, occurring as part of York Region's Municipal Comprehensive Review.

- York Region's proposed criteria to evaluate employment area conversion requests was released in March 2019
- The Region requested input on proposed employment area mapping and conversions and reassessed initial positions
- One request in Secondary Plan Area 2C was deemed not to require a conversion to proceed
- Two requests near Highway 404 & Wellington Street East were not approved by Regional Council
- One previously unevaluated request near Yonge & Edward Streets was not approved
- One previous request reconsidered and one final request on Centre Crescent were approved

- Two Magna Employment Area requests were approved by Regional Council
- Magna and Aurora East Employment Areas will not be mapped in the Regional Official Plan
- One late request for conversion in Aurora was not considered by York Region

Background

Employment areas are defined in the Provincial Policy Statement (2020) as “areas designated in an Official Plan for a cluster of business and economic activities including, but not limited to manufacturing, warehousing, offices, and associated retail and ancillary facilities.” Employment lands in the appropriate locations are key to maintaining a diverse and competitive economy. Jobs in employment areas account for more than half of Aurora’s employment base.

Employment planning is an important input into land needs assessment. Land budgeting and growth forecasting require confirming the employment land base, and its ability to accommodate jobs.

The process by which non-employment uses, such as residential or major retail, are introduced into employment areas is called a conversion. The changing nature of the economy and the market value of residential land has created considerable pressure to convert employment areas.

The Growth Plan requires upper and single-tier municipalities (such as York Region, in Aurora’s case) to designate and set density targets for employment areas in the Official Plans and to assess requests for employment area conversion. These are new Regional responsibilities whereas previously, employment designations were only included in local municipal official plans.

The tests for employment conversions are quite stringent, as employment lands are considered a finite resource to be protected for the long-term.

York Region’s proposed criteria to evaluate employment area conversion requests was released in March 2019

In March 2019 York Region released a staff report entitled “Proposed Employment Area Conversion Criteria.” The Growth Plan provides five criteria for assessing requests for employment land conversions. Regional staff developed an additional nine criteria, expanding on the existing Provincial criteria and providing further detail based on a York

Region context. The combined total of fourteen criteria are organized into the five theme areas as listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Employment Area Conversion Criteria in York Region

Theme Area	Growth Plan	York Region	Total
Supply	2	2	4
Viability	1	4	5
Access	0	1	1
Infrastructure	1	0	1
Region-wide Interests	1	2	3
Total	5	9	14

Of the fourteen criteria, the following three appear to be particularly important:

- Lands in recently designated and largely vacant employment areas (such as the 2C East employment lands in Aurora), because large new employment areas are key opportunities to attract or retain large or growing businesses;
- Lands in areas where the entire perimeter of the site is surrounded by lands designated and intended to remain designated for employment area purposes (i.e., conversions not to create a 'hole in the doughnut'); and,
- Preserving employment lands fronting 400-series highways, which are of strategic significance due to providing efficient movement of goods, access to major transportation infrastructure, and are desirable from an economic development perspective for being visible high-profile areas.

The Region's final deadline for submission of employment land conversion requests was November 29, 2019.

Analysis

The Region requested input on proposed employment area mapping and conversions and reassessed initial positions

Since the Region's revised November 2019 deadline for conversion requests, Regional staff hosted landowner meetings and contacted property owners within 120 metres of each proposed conversion, up to January 2020. Regional staff also hosted a virtual public information centre to obtain input, in June 2020.

On September 17, 2020, a special meeting of Regional Council was held, where a total of 14 deputations and 24 communications were received. Considering these consultations, as well as local municipal council positions, final recommendations on

employment lands were brought forward to York Region's Committee of the Whole on October 15, 2020.

Although report PDS19-069 in December 2019 initially recommended that Town staff's rationale within the report be forwarded to York Region as Aurora Council's position on the conversion requests, that recommendation did not carry. Regional staff considered Aurora to be one of only two municipalities not to have local municipal Council positions (i.e. no decision).

However, since Town staff reported to Aurora Council in December 2019 via PDS19-069, the list of employment conversion requests in Aurora have changed, the Region's positions on the Aurora requests have changed, and Regional employment land mapping for Aurora has been released. Below is an update on the seven previously reported employment land conversion requests in Aurora, and two new submissions.

One request in Secondary Plan Area 2C was deemed not to require a conversion to proceed

The request at 1588 St. John's Sideroad (site A4 in Attachment 1) is to permit an education/sports complex on Block 5 of the Aurora Mills subdivision. Given that the proposed use is permitted elsewhere in other employment areas as per Aurora's Official Plan, the proposed use may be accommodated through the local planning approval process. The applicant has advised staff that the proposed education/sports complex is not proceeding at this time.

Two requests near Highway 404 and Wellington Street East were not approved by Regional Council

Both Smart Centres requests for conversion A5 and A6, in the vicinity of Highway 404 and Wellington Street East, were denied. They are located at the southwest corner of Wellington Street East and First Commerce Drive/future Goulding Ave extension, and the northwest corner of Wellington Street East and Highway 404, respectively.

The A5 proposal was to add a retirement living apartment over a permitted one storey retail building. Request A6, which Smart Centres delegated to Regional Council on September 17 and October 15, 2020, was for four rental apartment buildings on lands designated for office, south of the Desjardins office building and east of the Walmart store. The requests were denied primarily due to their proximity to Highway 404.

One previously unevaluated request near Yonge & Edward Streets was not approved

Also refused was site A7 at 240 Edward Street. Known locally as the Cartwright building, this was a request that was received at the time of writing PDS19-069, and neither Regional nor Town staff had reviewed the submission at that time. The request was rejected due to the potential of introducing compatibility issues with surrounding employment uses, and potentially destabilizing the area.

One previous request was reconsidered and one final request on Centre Crescent was approved

Request A1 at 180-182 Centre Crescent, which was previously not recommended for approval by York Region staff, has been re-evaluated in light of discussions with Town staff, and will be permitted to proceed. A final conversion request in Aurora accepted for evaluation by York Region just prior to the November 29, 2019 deadline was A8: 181 Centre Crescent. This property is on the west side of Centre Crescent, across from 180 and 182 Centre Crescent.

In terms of rationale, both requests for conversion were approved due to being long-standing residential uses pre-dating their employment designations, they are directly adjacent the current Aurora Promenade boundary, and are within 500 metres of the Aurora GO Train station (a prime consideration for inclusion in Aurora's Major Transit Station Area).

Two Magna Employment Area requests were approved by Regional Council

Request A2 at 377 Magna Drive, and request A3 at 20 and 25 Mavrinac Boulevard, on the south and north sides of Wellington Street East at Stronach Boulevard respectively, are being permitted to proceed. Request A3 at the foot of Mavrinac Boulevard is a long-standing request previously presented to Aurora Council in 2016.

Request A3 initially included almost the entire balance of the Magna Employment Area's lands, with the exception of the current Magna headquarters building at 337 Magna Drive, an adjacent research and development facility at 375 Magna Drive, and a future office block at the southeast corner of Wellington Street East and Stronach Boulevard. However, the A3 request was subsequently revised to exclude 1289 Wellington Street East, geographically separated from the rest of the employment area at the southwest corner of Wellington Street East and Leslie Street.

Magna and Aurora East Employment Areas will not be mapped in the Regional Official Plan

The Region's initial employment lands mapping excluded not only the permitted conversions located within the Magna employment area, but also excluded lands not subject to a conversion request, such as 337 and 375 Magna Drive, and the southeast corner of Wellington Street East and Stronach Boulevard. The results of this exercise would have left only one Regionally-mapped parcel of employment land remaining in the entire Magna Employment Area, the 1289 Wellington Street East property at Wellington and Leslie Street, previously part of request A3.

The Region, after consulting with Town staff, have agreed to make the necessary boundary adjustments in the Region's employment land mapping as part of the updated Regional Official Plan to exclude 1289 Wellington Street East and the entirety of the Magna Employment Area.

As seen in Attachment 1, the Aurora East Employment Area, southwest of St. John's Sideroad and Earl Stewart Drive, was not considered Regionally-significant and excluded from York's mapping. In addition, the portions of the Industrial Parkway employment area that are currently part of the Aurora Promenade or the proposed Major Transit Station Area surrounding the Aurora GO Station, will also be excluded from the Region's employment land mapping.

The Region notes some employment areas are more appropriately designated by local municipalities and not in the Regional Official Plan. The Town of Aurora may maintain existing employment designations for lands currently designated as employment in the local Official Plan or change the designation to permit non-employment uses. The new Regional Official Plan will include a policy that will encourage lands identified as employment at the area municipal level, but not at the Regional scale, to continue to be mapped and protected for employment uses in local Official Plans.

One late request for conversion in Aurora was not considered by York Region

For consistency across the Region, and after already revising the deadline for submitting employment conversions from May 2019 to November 2019, Regional Council was firm in its position not to accept requests past the final deadline.

At the September 17, 2020 non-statutory meeting of Regional Council, a communication was included regarding 275 Wellington Street East which is the site of Transcontinental Printing in Aurora. Dated September 11, 2020, this request was received more than nine months past the deadline and was not evaluated by Regional or Town staff. The opportunity to resubmit the conversion request will be at the time of the next Regional

Official Plan Review which is expected to be a minimum of five years after the Province issues final approval in 2022.

Advisory Committee Review

Not applicable.

Legal Considerations

Legal considerations are contained throughout the report.

Financial Implications

Any conversion of employment lands to non-employment purposes will have an impact the Town's planned development and ongoing revenues.

Conformity to the policies of the new Regional Official Plan, once adopted, will occur through the Town's Official Plan review. Costs associated with the OP review have already been approved in the Town's Capital Budget, and consultants retained in accordance with the Town's procurement process.

Communications Considerations

The Town of Aurora will use 'Inform' as the level of engagement for this project. There are five different levels of community engagement to consider, with each level providing the community more involvement in the decision-making process. These levels are: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Empower. Examples of each can be found in the Community Engagement Policy. These options are based on the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum and assist in establishing guidelines for clearly communicating with our public and managing community engagement. In order to inform, this report will be posted to the Town's website.

Link to Strategic Plan

Proposed changes to Regional Official Plan that incorporate the policies of the Provincial Growth Plan supports the Town's Strategic Plan vision for an inclusive, growing, family-oriented community that integrates green spaces, environmental sustainability, economic vitality and communal gathering spaces. It also supports the Strategic Plan's guiding principles to broaden outreach and leverage partnerships, while

validating its goals and objectives to improve mobility and connectivity; invest in sustainable infrastructure; strengthen the fabric of the community; encouraging the stewardship and sustainability of Aurora's natural resources; and enabling a diverse, creative and resilient economy.

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

1. That Council provide direction.

Conclusions

York Region have finalized their position on seven employment land conversion requests previously presented to Aurora Council, considered an eighth request received just prior to the November 2019 submission deadline, and did not review a potential ninth request submitted in September 2020 because the submission window was closed. Of the eight requests received prior to the submission deadline, three were refused, and five were permitted to proceed (four being approved and one not requiring a conversion).

Employment Areas will be mapped and protected in the new Regional Official Plan and include a policy that encourages lands identified as employment at the local municipal level, but not at the Regional scale, to continue to be mapped and protected for employment uses in local Official Plans.

Attachments

Attachment 1 – York Region's Town of Aurora Proposed ROP Employment Area Mapping and Conversion Requests, October 2020

Attachment 2 – Summary of York Region Staff Employment Area Conversion Recommendations, October 2020

Attachment 3 – York Region Site Specific Employment Area Conversion Assessment Summary, October 2020

Attachment 4 – Request for Employment Conversion, Communication re: 275 Wellington Street East, Town of Aurora, September 2020

Previous Reports

PDS19-042, Regional MCR Update: Intensification Areas & Employment Land Conversion Requests, May 21 2019

PDS19-069, Regional MCR Update: Aurora Employment Land Conversion Requests,
December 3 2019

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on October 29, 2020

Approvals

**Approved by David Waters, MCIP, RPP, PLE, Director, Planning and Development
Services**

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer