

MUNICIPAL SUMMIT

OMB REFORM: PROCESS & POWERS



RECOMMENDATIONS

MUNICIPAL SUMMIT ON OMB REFORM: PROCESS AND POWERS

While each community is indeed unique, when it comes to planning matters, many of our communities encounter the same issues. When considering development proposals within the context of approved Official Plans – there is on-going pressure to alter their Official Plans to approve project-specific amendment requests. Repeated appeals to the OMB of Municipal councils' planning decisions to uphold their Official Plans and deny project-specific amendment requests, results in multiple communities fighting the same fight - wasting untold taxpayer dollars in the process. It is a lengthy, costly, and frustrating process and one that is clearly not working.

Discussions around the need for OMB reform are not new. As an issue it has jumped from the back burner to the front burner and back again many times over the past two decades. However, despite the many years of discussion, there has been little material change to the scope of powers, procedures or predictability of decision making of the OMB. This had led to frustration for the key stakeholders in the process – Municipal leaders, the development community and - most important - the residents and communities affected by planning decisions and OMB rulings regarding same.

OMB processes and scope of power have not kept pace with the changes in municipal planning necessitated by the explosion of growth in our communities. Effective planning requires certainty and predictability in the processes that govern it. What is needed, therefore, is clarity of the role and scope of power of all those with the authority for decision making.

In light of the pending Provincial review of the OMB, this is an opportune time for elected representatives – those decision-makers on the front lines of municipal planning - to work together and advocate for appropriate and effective reform(s) of the OMB.

Elected officials from across the Province have been asking for change for a long time and now, as a result of the **Summit on OMB Reform – Process and Powers** have come together to identify common goals and common solutions and to advocate for those changes in planning legislation. With reform, it is hoped that Municipalities will have more authority and predictability in local planning decisions.

Background

The impetus for the Municipal Summit on OMB Reform came from a motion brought forward by Councillor Tom Mrakas to Aurora Town Council in January of 2016 that spoke to the need to address the scope and powers of the OMB. Subsequent to that, and within the context of the need for OMB reform, an additional motion was put forward jointly by Councillor Michael Thompson and Councillor Tom Mrakas that spoke to the specific planning issue of development of open space/parkland and the need for criteria against which both municipalities and the OMB can consider when reviewing said development requests.

It was in the context of these two unanimously supported motions that the idea for a Municipal Summit on OMB reform was born. Following quickly on the heels of the passing of both motions, a Municipal Summit Planning Working Group was created to begin the work of creating the Summit. The event, held in the Markham Civic Centre on May 14th, was the result of months of hard work by this dedicated group of 17 elected officials from 12 municipalities across the GTA.

The Municipal Summit was a unique event; a grass roots gathering of elected officials from every corner of our Province, working together towards the common goal of affecting real change in the decision-making processes that affect how our communities are planned.

The daylong event featured a number of important speakers including Ms. Helen Cooper, Former Mayor of Kingston, Chair of the Ontario Municipal Board, AMO President; Mr. John Chipman, Author “Law Unto Itself”, former editor of the Ontario Municipal Board Reports; Ms. Valerie Shuttleworth Chief Planner for York Region; Mr. Leo Longo, Senior Partner Aird & Berlis LLP and Mr. Joe Vaccaro, CEO of the Ontario Home Builders Association. The panelists engaged attendees and solicited their input directly through breakout groups. Our guest Moderator, Mr. Bill Hogg, brought together the outcome of both the broader discussions as well as the break out groups so as to identify common themes that would inform the proposed recommendation(s)

Recommendations

At the outset, the purpose of the Summit was to identify common themes and common principles of reform that would modernize the process and procedures of the OMB. The purpose of which is to ensure that decisions of the Board reflect and respect the uniqueness of every community. In reviewing the comments of the attendees and the panelists as well as the municipal leaders that have weighed in through emails and other communication, and taking into consideration the over 100 municipalities that have endorsed the motion(s) advocating reform, the consensus view spoke to a clear need to review the scope of powers of the OMB.

Thus, the recommendations of the Summit can be boiled down to one overarching recommendation:

Limit the jurisdiction of the OMB to questions of law or process. Specifically, when considering appeals, require the OMB to uphold any planning decision(s) of Municipal Councils unless said decision(s) is contrary to the processes and rules set out in legislation.

A decision by a Municipal Council to uphold their Official Plan – a Plan that conforms to provincial legislation and is approved by the Province through the delegated authority of the relevant Regional government - should not be subject to appeal unless that decision is contrary to the processes and rules set out in legislation. Further, OMB decision-making processes/procedures should be predicated on the principle that planning

decisions of a local Municipal Council as they relate to their Official Plan will be upheld unless they are contrary to the processes and rules set out in legislation.

The recent changes to the Planning Act (Bill 73) as they speak to limits on appeals – namely that Official Plans cannot be appealed within the first two years of adoption - are a good first step, but they don't go far enough. The consensus of attendees was that appeals should be strictly limited. Some felt that amendment requests should not be allowed to be put forward at all unless proponents can demonstrate that the proposed changes to the Official Plan or zoning by-law fulfill a changing community need or in some way better the community. The onus should be on the applicant to demonstrate to the local Municipal Council that the changes to the Official Plan necessitated by a proposed project or development benefit the community and/or enhance it. If a Council sees that there is a clear benefit to the community then it is within the Councils authority to grant the amendments. However, if a Council feels that the application does not somehow better the community, then Council has full authority to deny the application without it being subject to appeal.

There should be consistency in the scope of authority of Municipal Councils. Any other decision by a Municipal Council is only subject to appeal through a judicial review the scope of which is errors in process or law. The question then is - why are planning decisions different? The answer is they should not.

As it stands now, Municipalities are required to review application after application, requesting amendment after amendment; considering each in isolation as opposed to the integrated whole. Piecemeal planning negates the utility and functionality of Official Plans. Multiple changes to a Municipal Plan required by multiple project-specific amendment requests compromises the integrity of the Official Plan and indeed the planning process as a whole.

Municipal planning is a complex process. But the current legislation does not recognize or reflect that complexity. The legislation does not adequately address what can be appealed, who can put forward an appeal, and the relative weight that Municipal Council decisions will be given in the adjudication of appeals. Similarly, vague terminology – such as “...due consideration” – significantly impacts the predictability of decision making processes of the Board. Even timelines for decision-making are unworkable. Despite the fact that even mildly contentious development proposals require considerable amount of time to compile the information necessary for informed Council decisions, a decision must be rendered within 180 days or face appeal. This is not good planning. This is ineffective and inefficient public planning.

Clearly there does still need to be a degree of flexibility in the decision making processes. It is not the expectation that Official Plans are carved in stone. However, the drivers of community change should be the community itself. Planning legislation – including the OMB Act - should outline in very specific and very limited terms the basis upon which a Municipal Council decision to refuse an amendment to its Official Plan or zoning bylaw can be appealed. Concomitantly, decisions by the OMB when considering appeals of local Council planning decisions should reflect and respect the vision of the communities as defined in their Official Plans.

In closing, we recognize that our communities are dynamic. They continue to grow and evolve over time. But with that evolution comes a very real pressure to manage that growth in a way that is respectful of the unique character of the affected communities.

Through necessary legislative reform and the clarification of the scope of power and authority of all decision making bodies – both elected and appointed - predictable, appropriate decision-making processes can be achieved.

We thank the panelists, our moderator, our sponsors and most of all everyone who participated in this process, for the incredible input and hard work that has been undertaken.

Sincerely,

The Members of the OMB Reform Summit Working Group:

Councillor Tom Mrakas, Chair (Aurora)
Councillor Michael Thompson (Aurora).
Councillor Marianne Meed Ward (Burlington)
Councillor Nicholas Ermeta (Cambridge)
Councillor Frank Sebo (Georgina)
Councillor Cathy Downer (Guelph)
Councillor Yvonne Fernandes (Kitchener)
Councillor Karen Rea (Markham)
Regional Councillor Nirmala Armstrong (Markham)
Councillor Don Hamilton (Markham)
Councillor Christina Bisanz (Newmarket)
Councillor Karen Cilevitz (Richmond Hill)
Councillor David West (Richmond Hill)
Councillor & Deputy Mayor Pat Molloy (Uxbridge)
Councillor Marilyn Iafrate (Vaughan)
Councillor Alan Shefman (Vaughan)
Councillor Mary Ann Grimaldi (Welland)
Councillor Steve Yamada (Whitby)