

The Province Requires Cobourg to Plan for Growth — It Does Not Require Cobourg to Abandon Planning

I welcome the fact that Council ultimately adopted an Interim Control By-law. Given the number, scale and potential long-term consequences of the development applications now confronting Cobourg, I believe this was a necessary and responsible step.

However, after watching the August 20 Special Council meeting, I am left with serious concerns about both the purpose of the meeting and what it revealed about the state of planning and governance in Cobourg.

The Mayor had previously stated that he intended to respond “point by point” to concerns I had raised regarding development and planning in Cobourg. It now appears that a substantial part of this hastily called Special Council meeting was used for precisely that purpose.

The meeting was called with only a few days’ notice, required substantial preparation by Town staff, occupied Council for more than four hours, and was conducted at public expense.

Yet a considerable portion of it was devoted not to deciding the Interim Control By-law, but to defending the Mayor’s record, defending his administration, responding to his critics and, at times, denigrating those who have questioned the direction in which the Town is being taken.

That is troubling.

Town Council should be a forum for conducting the public’s business. It should not become a taxpayer-funded platform for an incumbent Mayor to defend himself against political criticism or diminish those running against him in an election.

The Mayor’s opening remarks established the tone. He characterized criticism surrounding development as “misinformation,” “misconstrued information,” “outmoded information” and “outdated information.”

Those are serious accusations.

But simply labelling legitimate questions as misinformation does not answer them.

In fact, despite what appeared to be an effort to discredit the concerns that have been raised, the meeting ultimately confirmed several of the most important ones.

Cobourg still does not have a completed and updated Official Plan.

At the same time, the Town is processing major development applications that could substantially alter Cobourg’s built form, infrastructure requirements, neighbourhoods and character for generations.

And it is doing so through a newly reorganized Development Department with a relatively new and inexperienced planning team.

That is not a criticism of individual staff members. New professionals need opportunities to gain experience, and staff should be treated respectfully.

But it makes experienced leadership, strong professional oversight, sound policy and a clear Official Plan even more important.

The responsibility for ensuring those things rests ultimately with the Mayor and Council.

Blaming the Province

One of the central themes advanced by the Mayor was that the Town is simply responding to provincial requirements — that what is happening in Cobourg is essentially being dictated by Queen's Park.

That is not an accurate description of Ontario's planning system.

Yes, Ontario requires municipalities to accommodate growth, increase housing supply and support intensification.

But the Province expressly describes municipalities as the “**primary decision-makers for local communities.**” Municipalities implement provincial policy through their Official Plans, zoning by-laws and other local planning decisions. ([Ontario](#))

Ontario also specifically states that the Provincial Planning Statement provides municipalities with “**tools and flexibility**” to address housing needs in ways responsive to local conditions and priorities. (Ontario)

Most importantly, provincial policy does not say that Cobourg must accommodate growth through a succession of high-rise towers.

The Provincial Planning Statement requires municipalities to support intensification, but it also says that intensification targets are to be established “based on local conditions.” It calls for a range and mix of housing and directs municipalities to coordinate growth with infrastructure and public services. ([Ontario](#))

Those are important distinctions.

There are many ways to accommodate population growth and provide additional housing: gentle density, townhouses, stacked townhouses, apartments, mixed-use main streets, mid-rise buildings, accessory units and other forms of development that can be compatible with Cobourg's scale and character.

The Province requires Cobourg to plan for growth.

It does not require Cobourg to abandon planning.

Why the Official Plan Matters

This brings us back to what I believe is the central issue.

An Official Plan is the community's principal document for determining:

- where growth should occur;
- what type and scale of development is appropriate;
- how neighbourhoods should evolve;
- what infrastructure will be required;
- where parks, schools and public facilities should go;
- how transportation should function;
- how heritage and environmental assets should be protected; and
- ultimately, what kind of community we are trying to build.

The Planning Act itself requires municipalities to periodically review and update their Official Plans so they remain consistent with provincial policy. ([Ontario](#))

The Province therefore cannot reasonably be used as an excuse for proceeding without an up-to-date local planning vision.

Quite the opposite.

The Official Plan is precisely the mechanism through which Cobourg is supposed to translate provincial growth requirements into a coherent plan reflecting **Cobourg's own circumstances, infrastructure, character and aspirations.**

Yet updating that plan was not treated as an urgent priority at the beginning of this term of Council.

Instead, the Town proceeded with a new comprehensive Zoning By-law before completing the Official Plan review — reversing what I believe should have been the logical planning sequence.

Now major applications seeking substantial increases in height and density are arriving while that broader community planning exercise remains unfinished.

That is why people are concerned.

An Important Result — and an Important Warning

I support Council's decision to implement the Interim Control By-law.

It provides an opportunity to stop, study and properly consider applications proposing development beyond the height and built-form permissions currently contemplated by the Town's zoning.

But the need for an ICBL should itself cause us to ask how we arrived here.

If the Town had completed a comprehensive Official Plan review earlier, established a clear community vision, aligned zoning with that vision, properly assessed infrastructure capacity and established where greater density was appropriate, we might not now be trying to impose an emergency pause while multiple transformative applications are already before us.

The irony of the August 20 meeting is therefore striking.

It appeared intended, in significant part, to demonstrate that the Mayor's critics were wrong.

Instead, it confirmed the central concern:

Cobourg is confronting development proposals capable of changing this community for generations without first completing the comprehensive Official Plan that should guide those decisions.

The Interim Control By-law gives Cobourg an opportunity to correct course.

We should use that opportunity constructively — not to stop growth, but to ensure that growth is thoughtful, properly planned, supported by infrastructure and consistent with the kind of community Cobourg residents want to leave to the generations that follow us.

That is not anti-development.

That is planning.

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