

Unionville Residents Association

Written Submission and Deputation on “Supplementary Report, City of Markham Comments on York Region’s Growth Forecast and Land Needs Assessment to 2051”

Markham Development Services Committee Meeting, October 12, 2021, Agenda Item 9.2

URA-LandNeedsAssmt2021-10-12

This is an official deputation from the Unionville Residents Association (URA). URA has been actively involved in this land needs assessment since last Spring. We’ve deputed to both York and Markham Councils, we’ve met offline with both York Region’s and Markham planning staff, we’ve had lengthy email exchanges with them and we’ve had email exchanges with some Regional Councillors.

We have consistently requested that York Region should study higher intensification scenarios. We all understand that higher intensification is a good thing:

- preserves agricultural land for a longer period
- requires less infrastructure per capita
- is better for transit and active transportation
- provides more opportunities for affordable housing types
- is a key part of reaching net zero Greenhouse Gas emissions by 2050

The Growth Plan recognizes the benefits of intensification and the need for more, not less, as time goes on. Our members are also aligned with this thinking – they understand the negatives of sprawl into the whitebelt on traffic, the environment and agriculture.

The phased 50/55% intensification scenario recommended by York staff on September 16 is an improvement from what was proposed in March. It identified a need for **925 hectares** of urban expansion for community land in Markham, an impressive 28% reduction from the March number. But it still only translates to 56% intensification for Markham. This is frustrating, because Markham already has a target of 60% intensification set back in 2011, and is achieving roughly 63% intensification.

We were pleased that York Council directed staff to study 60% regional intensification, to be reported back at a Special Council meeting on October 21. Recall that 60% is the target originally recommended by staff planners back in 2019. Based on the data in Table 3 of the Region staff report, we are **optimistic that 60% intensification** would substantially reduce the amount of urban expansion lands.

Everyone agrees that intensification and less urban expansion is desirable, but is it achievable? The purported reason always given against more intensification is the need for a balance of housing, and questions as to whether the market will accept largely apartment housing stock. Certainly our perspective in Markham, based on current developer applications and plans, is very positive about market acceptance of apartments. In fact, Markham could readily achieve our assigned 2051 population target entirely with apartments, if you believe developer claims.

So DSC should not support the phased 50/55% scenario until we see the new 60% results. And we should continue to press for study of scenarios with even higher intensification or less whitebelt usage in Markham, to reflect what’s on the ground.

There is also a concern as to whether Markham can actually control its own destiny with respect to loss of white belt. In an email back to us in September, Regional Staff stated: *Furthermore, it is important to note that the local intensification rates (e.g. 56% for Markham under the recommended phased 50-55% scenario) is only a minimum and Regional staff would support and encourage local municipalities to plan for higher levels of intensification.*

But what does this really mean? Can Markham set its own whitebelt plan and reflect that in its Official Plan and maps? So we asked the Region. The answer is – “no”. To quote from an email we got last week: *The higher(intensification) target that Markham may ultimately plan for **does not change** the amount of urban expansion land that the City is required to include in its official plan as a result of the Regional Official Plan and land needs assessment.*

Even if Markham Council set an intensification rate of 90%, the 925 hectares of urban expansion would remain on the maps in the Markham OP! In short, Markham cannot independently save its whitebelt. All paths go through the Region.

We note that 925 ha, representing 30 years of urban expansion, is a large area. Even if strong phasing policies are introduced in our Official Plan to restrict the location and rate of whitebelt development, this 925 ha will not be attractive to agricultural investment, due to the uncertainty of payback time. Look at the Pickering Airport lands remaining unfarmed and properties not maintained due to uncertainty of an airport.

Recommendation 2 of the Markham staff report states:

2. That in the absence of further detailed analysis of the 55% and 60% intensification scenarios with respect to assumptions and implications for Markham, Council support the Phased 50-55% intensification as the preferred scenario.

This seems to imply that Markham staff might support a 60% Regional intensification rate if the analysis was available.

Our concern is that Regional Council will make a decision on October 21 which will render further input by Markham irrelevant. So this has created urgency for Markham DSC to take a firm decision today.

We urge Committee to replace Recommendation 2 with clauses something like

- *That Markham Council urges York Region to adopt a regional scenario*
 - *where the urban expansion for Markham community land is substantially less than 925 ha, either by increasing the regional intensification target or by adjusting local population targets*
 - *where the assigned intensification rate for Markham be not less than 65%*
- *That Markham Council urgently request transmittal of the analysis of the 60% regional intensification scenario and urges Regional Council to defer any final decision until after input from municipalities on this scenario.*

Finally, we want to indicate our support for Recommendation 4 under any and all intensification scenarios,

4. That any white belt lands in Markham that are not needed to accommodate 2051 growth not be designated as 'Future Urban Area', but rather maintain a non-urban (agriculture or similar) designation in the Regional Official Plan and Markham Official Plan.

In doing so, please direct our Regional Councillors and our staff to work with the Region to figure out what are the necessary political and administrative actions necessary to make sure we do not end up with a Pickering airport like scenario.

Thank you.