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Group hopes Places to Grow plan will help green space cause

As one crests the hill entering into Millbrook, Ontario, long, green fields roll away to the horizon. Some call that spot the Gateway to Millbrook and a symbol of the village's heritage as a farming community.

Robert Winslow, a Millbrook resident and founder of the well-known Fourth Line Theatre, is one of a local group concerned that those long, green fields could soon be covered by unchecked urban sprawl.

Currently zoned for agricultural use, 250 acres of land near Millbrook is in the process of being purchased and amalgamated for development purposes.

Winslow is a member of Greenhills Community Vision, a local group focused on protection of the Cavan-Millbrook-North Monaghan Township's cultural, environmental and historical features.

"We don't want to see something turned into urban use without more process in terms of more input from residents," says Winslow. "While a lot of people in the organization recognize that there has to be some development, our concern is that it is controlled and not random."

The group has called on Public Infrastructure Renewal Minister David Caplan to take notice of plans for the land.

The group says unchecked development goes against the Places to Grow plan, launched by the Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal in June of this year. The plan includes a mandate to accommodate a certain amount of population growth in previously developed areas and make better use of urban space.

Winslow says Peterborough could accommodate much of the expected regional population growth with intensification.

“Personally I don’t see that we need to have any development here,” says Winslow. “I don’t buy the idea that we have to accommodate massive population growth.”

He says that Millbrook’s distinctive village flavour and farming heritage has the potential to generate ongoing revenue for the community through ecotourism and continued agricultural activities.

John Fallis, a local Millbrook farmer, is also involved in the fight for the preservation of the farmlands. He notes the American Farmland Trust has developed a system of calculating the cost of community services to demonstrate the impact of residential development on the community financially. “The cost associated with services for farmland is of such a difference compared to the cost associated with services for residential development that there is a net benefit from the farmland,” says Fallis. He says most municipal planners are aware that residential development doesn’t pay. However, the right of landowners to sell to developers is one of a number of factors affecting development decisions.

Winslow notes that the fight against urban sprawl is ongoing and difficult. “Basically the game is stacked against us,” he says, adding that one ray of hope is that some of the candidates running for the November municipal election have a very strong interest in environmental and sustainability issues.

“We have to get politicians in municipal politics who are interested in these issues,” says Winslow.

The group is also hoping the Places to Grow plan will aid in their cause. The group has met with members of the Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal to present their concerns.

At the same time, the Greenhills group continues to be proactive in creating and presenting an alternative vision to residents of Millbrook, a vision of fields that continue to be green and of development that is slow, well-thought-out and sustainable.