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Town struggles to stay small

Councillor fears growth will mean higher taxes

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It's quiet, safe and green and the people of Oakville would like to keep it that way.

But the unrelenting pressures of growth, collecting along the borders of this tranquil town, may put an end to its citizens' dream to keep Oakville exactly the way it is.

A recent Environics survey, commissioned by the municipality, spelled out — in no uncertain terms — the wishes of residents to keep Oakville a quiet place, rich with ravines, creeks and green spaces.

But while sympathetic to residents' fears, Oakville mayor Ann Mulvale is a realist. The status quo cannot be maintained, she says. Other Toronto-area municipalities have been in the same position — Oakville cannot resist the demand for land to feed a growing population expanding ever outward from the centre.

Still, Mulvale is well aware of the dangers of rapid, uncontrolled growth. The answer, as she sees it, is to balance the interests of all concerned, so the town ends up with a community that's sustainable both environmentally and financially. One way Oakville has tried to do that is by easing in development, phase by phase, she says.

Another way is by implementing regulations that serve not only to minimize damage to the greenbelts but actually enhance natural features as building takes place.

Peter Gilgfan, head of Matamy Homes, a long-time builder in the area as well as a resident, believes the town makes a concerted effort to stay green. His company, for example, is part of Oakville's Millennium Project, a program that aims to make it possible for residents to walk or bike to the lake from anywhere in town through a system of parks and trails."

market is too small. After decades of low-rise construction in Mississauga, he says, only now is the city attracting high-rise condos. And it will be another 15 to 20 years before Oakville can support that level of density, he says.

Until now, Oakville builders have been selling mainly single-family detached houses. (Two-thirds of the almost 900 housing starts to the end of October last year were in that category, according to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp.)

But Sanderson says the housing mix is shifting, as more townhouses, semi-detached and detached houses on smaller lots come on the market.

Mulvale notes that housing in West Oak Trails must pass an affordability test, a requirement laid down by the Liberal provincial government in the 1980s when the land was first assembled for development. "Land prices in Oakville are higher, so you need not only CEOs, but a range of housing types, including for the guy who works at the Ford plant," she says.

But whatever style Oakville's housing takes, people such as Elgar are convinced that residents will end up footing the bill for growth. He cites a long-term financial report prepared for the Region of Halton indicating that infrastructure for residential expansion (water and sewage systems, for example) is being financed partly through borrowing in the form of debentures and through transfers from the operating budget.

But Gilgan refutes Elgar's contention. "It is categorically untrue that ratepayers are paying for development," he insists, noting that development charges take into account not only the impact on such things as sewers and water but also new police stations, garbage trucks or libraries. "The developer has to provide evidence through the use of a large accounting firm that there will be a net benefit to the community, and so maintain a lower level of taxation."

In fact, Gilgan says there have been situations when his consultants sent him back to the drawing board to rework plans until they produced a net economic benefit to the municipality.

As Oakville's official plan takes its course in West Oak Trails, Elgar and others are gearing up for the next skirmish: plans to develop more than 3,000 hectares of mainly agricultural land north of Dundas St.
