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Watson vows urban border will be 'vigorously' defended; Previous council got it right, mayor says

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There is a limit to growth in Ottawa, Mayor Jim Watson says, and that amount is 230 hectares and not one millimetre more.

He wants the city to "vigorously" defend the previous council's decision to limit expansion of the city's urban boundary at a critical and costly Ontario Municipal Board appeal scheduled to begin next month.

"I was very clear during the election campaign that I did not support the opening and re-examining of the urban boundary issue," Watson told reporters Tuesday afternoon.

"I think that the previous council did get it right."

"This is an important issue for us. It determines at the end of the day who's going to make the decisions with respect to growth and urban planning. I believe it should be the elected officials."

Last year, council decided to expand the boundary by 230 hectares over 15 years, rejecting a city staff recommendation to expand by 851 hectares over 20 years. Some in the development community argued for 2,500 to 3,000 hectares more.

The 20 appellants named in the OMB appeal, scheduled to take place over five weeks starting Feb. 22 at a cost of \$400,000, are challenging the city on various fronts: some want the 851 hectares originally recommended by staff, some want even more added, while others dispute some of the factors the city used to define the boundary, including the city's population growth assumptions.

The province requires that the city have at least a 15-years' worth supply of land ready for development. The Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Watson's portfolio when he was a provincial cabinet minister, has already approved the 230 hectare limit. And the city's planning staff are now on-side.

New OMB-related rules call for any evidence that will be used in an OMB appeal to be presented to council first. So Tuesday, the city solicitor and the city's outside legal expert, **Bruce Engell**, presented a report to council outlining some of the appellants' witness statements.

But a number of councillors -- backed by former councillor and planning committee chairman Gord Hunter, who presented his views as a private citizen -- want to discuss settling with some of the

appellants. Councillors Rainer Bloess and Rick Chiarelli indicated they wanted to explore reverting to staff's original recommendation of 851 hectares, hoping to reduce the OMB costs.

Some of these issues may have been discussed at a one-hour in-camera session of councillors, city lawyers and the mayor over the lunch hour on Tuesday.

But moments after the public part of the planning meeting was reconvened, the committee voted to receive the report endorsing the Mayor's position.

Still, the issue may not be over, as the report must be accepted by full council on Wednesday. Bloess, for one, indicated he would be "testing the waters" to see if there was any support around the council table to have city staff try to negotiate with OMB appellants.

If the mayor's view is anything to go by, it seems there will be little change in council's position.

"I feel confident that we'll defend the city's position, that we'll defend it vigorously at the OMB," said Watson. "I've obviously spent a lot of time over the last couple of weeks talking to members of council and letting them know my particular point of view."

Watson added that he believes holding the urban boundary expansion to 230 hectares is in the "public's interest" in part because of "the cost of sprawl."

But Hunter said the original staff-recommended 851 hectares would not encourage sprawl because portions of the land are already serviced by municipal infrastructure. Instead, the city is not only risking losing an appeal at the OMB, but driving potential residents and taxpayers to bedroom communities like Rockland and Kemptville.

"Instead of controlling city growth, the city is losing control of growth," Hunter told the committee, commenting later that the decision to stick with 230 hectares was being made for "political reasons."