

Is All Greenfield Development in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area Sprawl? A Resounding No

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Bottom line: The greenfield development envisaged in the Provincial Policy Statement (“PPS”) and Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (“Growth Plan”) is not sprawl

Provincial planning initiatives in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (“GGH”) (both the PPS and the Growth Plan) and the rest of Ontario (the PPS) direct growth to the built-up portions of municipalities. In much of the GGH, at least 50% of future residential development must occur within the built-up areas of municipalities (as defined by boundaries set in 2006). However, residents also prefer various housing types not satisfied by housing constructed in the built-up areas, which are primarily apartments. Therefore, ground-related housing like single-detached and semi-detached houses and townhouses must also be built mostly on farmland or other vacant lands on the edge of a municipality’s built-up area (collectively known as “greenfields”).

The Province allows greenfield development under stringent conditions, including planning for complete communities with a range of housing and employment uses, minimum population densities for new communities and intensified lands around transit nodes. This development pattern is not sprawl – it is not leapfrogged development. It reflects comprehensive planning.

Ontario’s widely acclaimed *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* was approved in 2006 by Order-in-Council under the *Places to Grow Act, 2005*.¹ While the plan aimed to mitigate sprawl by directing significant growth to build-up areas and encouraging complete communities, it acknowledged there would be some development on greenfield lands. The intention was this development would be compact and in transit-supportive communities. In 2007, the Growth Plan was recognized as a Smart Growth, anti-sprawl document when the American Planning Association awarded it the prestigious Daniel Burnham Award.²

It is time to stop referring to all greenfield development as sprawl. The City of Ottawa (“Ottawa”), for example, in its preparation for the latest version of its official plan, clearly distinguishes the type of greenfield development occurring within its boundaries from sprawl.³ A failure to acknowledge this distinction in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (“GTHA”) will

result in higher housing costs and longer commutes as households move further away from employment centres to find less expensive ground-related homes.

The illusory truth: all greenfield development is sprawl

There is a misconception, especially among Toronto-centric urban observers, that any development on farmland or other vacant lands on the edge of a municipality's built-up area is "sprawl". These observers consider all low-density developments on greenfield lands sprawl because they expect they generate excess volumes of greenhouse gases, contribute to congestion, eat up much-needed farmland and are not economically sustainable over time. Their solution is to prohibit greenfield development and exclusively accommodate the demand for additional housing units through redevelopment and intensifying existing built-up urban areas.

These observers argue the Province's current Growth Plan for the expansive GGH promotes sprawl through the development of greenfield lands. This argument can be gleaned from recent editorials in the Toronto Star and the Globe and Mail and the writings of well-known Toronto-based urbanists, including David Crombie, Ann Golden and Ken Greenberg.

In 2019, the Toronto Star condemned the proposed changes to the Growth Plan for the GGH to reduce density targets from what the previous government had approved:

The government is dramatically rolling back the density targets brought in under the Liberals and encouraging urban sprawl with single-family homes that can't support public transit.⁴

The Globe and Mail accused the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing of advocating sprawl after he urged the City of Hamilton ("Hamilton") to expand its urban boundary:

Soon after, Mr. Ford confirmed the housing model he really believes in. As he rejected density in cities, his housing minister, Steve Clark, advocated for sprawl. Last fall, Hamilton's city council boldly rejected a plan to expand its urban boundary. Instead, it aimed to add more housing within city limits. Density, not sprawl. But Mr. Clark last week called this "anti-growth and anti-housing ideology." He wants to overturn Hamilton's decision. Will this be the slogan for Mr. Ford's election campaign: Sprawl good, density bad.⁵

Ken Greenberg praised Hamilton for not expanding its urban boundary and chided the Province for threatening to overturn the decision and mandating sprawl:

Cities are trying to do better than this. Hamilton endorsed a responsible growth option within its designated urban boundary that calls for intensified and contained transit-oriented community growth — inherently more sustainable. But the Province stepped in, threatening to reverse that decision by mandating sprawl beyond the city's urban boundary.⁶

According to David Crombie and Anne Golden, the continued outward expansion of municipal urban boundaries in the GGH will enable more sprawl and not provide the types of housing people need and can afford:

Optimizing use of land already approved for development and building in our existing communities, rather than through continued outward expansion, is clearly the most effective long-term economic strategy and the only way to provide the types of housing people need and can afford.

It's important that the premier, our mayors, and our federal government develop a housing strategy that focuses on these key issues. If the proposed solutions focus on enabling more sprawl, expect more of the same on housing prices and lack of affordability.⁷

Orderly and comprehensively planned low-density development is not sprawl

In his landmark history of sprawl, Robert Bruegmann defines sprawl as “low-density, scattered, urban development without systematic large-scale or regional public land-use planning”.⁸ **While low-density development is a central feature of sprawl, it has to be scattered and not planned on a large or regional scale to be labelled sprawl, according to Bruegmann.**⁹

A 1998 ground-breaking study by Robert Burchell et al. endeavoured to quantify the costs and benefits of sprawl. It formulated a working definition of sprawl which stresses a noncontiguous or leapfrog pattern of development outward from the urban core:

Sprawl refers to a particular type of suburban peripheral growth. It refers to development that expands in an unlimited and noncontiguous (leapfrog) way outward from the solidly built-up core of a metropolitan area. In terms of land-use type, sprawl includes both residential and nonresidential development. Residential development contains primarily single-family housing, including significant numbers of distant units scattered in outlying areas. Nonresidential development includes shopping centers, strip retail outlets along arterial roads, industrial and office parks, and free-standing industrial and office buildings, as well as schools and other public buildings.¹⁰

There have been other attempts by several academics to define and quantify sprawl more clearly.¹¹ George Galster et al. discussed various definitions of sprawl. They then identified what they felt were the main variables that could be used to define the presence of sprawl and then tested their application. They identified eight dimensions of land use patterns that may be used to measure the presence of sprawl. These dimensions include: density, continuity, concentration, clustering, centrality, nuclearity, mixed uses and proximity. The value of these measures determines the presence or extent of sprawl. They tested their model for 13 areas and concluded that their approach is useful in providing a more precise conceptual and operational definition of sprawl which will facilitate better research on sprawl.¹²

Also, a report by Smart Growth America identifies four factors that need to be examined to assess whether communities have more compact or sprawl development. These factors are residential and employment density, neighbourhood mix of homes, jobs and services, strength of activity centres and downtowns, and accessibility of the street network.¹³ All of these factors are addressed by the Growth Plan and/or planning regulations and approvals.

The point is that there have been measures and attempts to define and quantify sprawl in the academic literature. Although these measures have not been stringently applied to the Ontario development patterns, an understanding of the variables used would suggest that development in Ontario would score well on these measures in terms of being compact development and not sprawl. The takeaway is that simply arbitrarily labelling all greenfield development or development outside existing urban boundaries as sprawl is not a useful definition of sprawl.

“Balanced growth is not sprawl” – City of Ottawa

In a recent staff report to Council, Ottawa’s Director of Economics and Long Range Planning, Don Herweyer, makes the case for greenfield development, which is differentiated here from sprawl.¹⁴ The report recommends that the Council approve a “balanced scenario” as its growth management strategy, accommodating 51% of residential growth to 2046 through intensification. Council approved the balanced scenario in February of this year.

A fundamental tenet of Ottawa’s balanced growth strategy is the need to understand the housing preferences of its residents and that a healthy market must provide choice:

The City introduced minimum density requirements for new suburbs in 2003. In 2009 the City introduced a prohibition on development of new country lot subdivisions which many viewed as unplanned sprawl. In previous years, such subdivisions saw several areas of rural Ottawa converted to isolated and scattered residential pockets. Since then, the City has progressively increased the density and required mix of housing types for new suburban neighbourhoods while recognising that people have housing preferences and that a healthy market must continue to provide a choice.¹⁵

The report also argues that the kinds of suburban neighbourhoods that Ottawa has been building are not the same as the ones that gave rise to the term “urban sprawl”:

The large low-density suburban neighbourhoods of single-detached houses that originally gave rise to the term “urban sprawl” have changed dramatically. Even in newer suburban locations, those parcels of land that were left vacant as development proceeded on surrounding land are often being developed at higher densities than originally proposed.¹⁶

Additionally, Ottawa adopted urban expansion criteria to ensure future greenfield development does not result in sprawl:

The proposed Urban Expansion Criteria have been designed to meet the objectives of the Provincial Policy Statement and the objectives of the Council-approved Policy Directions for the Official Plan. The priority of the criteria is Rural land that can be accessed and serviced economically by existing infrastructure wherever possible, is close to existing or planned rapid transit stations and close to existing jobs and community facilities.¹⁷

Prohibiting greenfield development results in higher housing prices and longer commutes

Alain Bertaud, in his insightful work, “Order Without Design: How Markets Shape Cities,” which applies the theories of urban economics to the practice of urban planning, decries the

setting of urban expansion boundaries, saying they lead to higher housing prices and longer commutes:

Setting arbitrary spatial barriers to urban expansion, such as greenbelts and UGBs [urban growth boundaries], however, results in higher land and housing prices, longer commute times, and other negative outcomes as demonstrated in Hanoi's master plan.¹⁸

Bertaud is also critical of those advocating freezing all greenfield development, saying the containment policies are not the way to deal with food, mobility, and greenhouse gas issues:

I think containment is simply the wrong solution for preserving food supply, improving mobility, and decreasing the productions of GHGs. Not only is containment policy unable to solve these issues, but its systematic implementation can have serious consequences for housing affordability and for the welfare of urban households in general.¹⁹

It is time to stop referring to all greenfield development as sprawl. Ottawa, for example, in its preparation for the latest version of its official plan, clearly distinguishes the type of greenfield development occurring there from sprawl. Failure to acknowledge this distinction in the GTHA will result in higher housing costs and longer commutes. Curtailing the supply of greenfield ground-related homes will raise the prices of these units, shifting demand for existing homes which will raise prices and/or have potential purchasers opt for ground-related homes further afield, which may increase commuting times.

Sources:

¹ "A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe" was awarded the prestigious Daniel Burnham Award by the American Planning Association in 2007 for being a landmark comprehensive plan that is both visionary and pragmatic. Ontario, "Press Release: Ontario Receives Prestigious American Growth Planning Award, April 17, 2007." [Online] Available: <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/86908/ontario-receives-prestigious-american-growth-planning-award>

² Ontario (2005). "A Place to Grow Act." [Online]. Available <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-38/session-1/bill-136>

³ The PPS guides Ottawa's greenfield planning as Ottawa does not have a provincially created regional planning document like the Greater Golden Horseshoe's growth plan.

⁴ Toronto Star (2019). "Ford's 'growth plan' encourages more sprawl in Toronto area." Editorial, January 16, 2019. [Online] Available: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2019/01/16/fords-growth-plan-encourages-more-sprawl-in-toronto-area.html>

⁵ The Globe and Mail (2022). "When it comes to the housing crisis, Canada is a lot of talk but not too much action." Editorial, April 9, 2022. [Online] Available: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-when-it-comes-the-housing-crisis-canada-is-a-lot-of-talk-but-not-much/>

⁶ Toronto Star (2022). "Ontario's top down approach to urban growth is reversing progress on many levels." Ken Greenberg, April 20, 2022. [Online] Available: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2022/04/20/ontarios-top-down-approach-to-urban-growth-is-reversing-progress-on-many-levels.html>

⁷ Toronto Star (2022). "We cannot sprawl our way to housing affordability." Anne Golden and David Crombie, January 18, 2022. [Online] Available: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2022/01/18/we-cannot-sprawl-our-way-to-housing-affordability.html>

⁸ Bruegmann, Robert (2005). "Sprawl: A Compact History." Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 14.

⁹ As an aside, Bruegmann finds that sprawl has been a persistent feature in urban areas since the beginning of urban history. Bruegmann, 18.

¹⁰ Burchell, Robert W., et al. (1998). "The Costs of Sprawl – Revisited." Transportation Research Board, Report 39, National Academy Press, 6.

¹¹ Galster, George, et al. (2001). "Wrestling Sprawl to the Ground: Defining and Measuring an Elusive Concept.", Housing Policy Debate, v. 12, no. 4, Washington DC: Fannie Mae Foundation; and, Ingram, Gregory, et al. (2009). "Smart Growth Policies: An Evaluation of Programs and Outcomes." Columbia University Press: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

¹² Galster, "Wrestling Sprawl to the Ground: Defining and Measuring an Elusive Concept," 29.

¹³ Smart Growth America (2014). "Measuring Sprawl 2014." [Online] Available: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/measuring-sprawl-2014.pdf>

¹⁴ Ottawa (2020). "New Growth Plan – Growth Management Study." Don Herweyer, Director, Economic Development and Long Range Planning. [Online] Available: <http://app05.ottawa.ca/sirepub/cache/2/fbafmrrfzmkjgfhxnb3hieu/63653906272022023641426.PDF>

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹⁸ Bertaud, Alain (2018). "Order Without Design: How Markets Shape Cities." Cambridge: MIT Press, 140.

¹⁹ Ibid., 335.

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