

Questioning the growth plan

MARKET LEADING POLICY?

By Edward LaRusic

A recently released **Neptis Foundation** publication says the development industry—and not provincial policy—is leading the creation of denser, more compact communities, bringing into question how effective the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* has been at managing growth.

The brief, called [Rethinking Sprawl](#), offers some preliminary analysis of how cities in Canada are growing. Neptis executive director **Marcy Burchfield** said that the findings will be expanded in an upcoming report.

“We were able to measure over 20 years the outward growth of the urban footprint for four Canadian city [regions—Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and the GTA] and we found in the first decade that three of the four were essentially sprawling [using] the very simplistic definition of sprawl: the rate of increase in land versus the rate of increase in population. In the second decade from 2001 to 2011, none of the city [regions] showed that. Their populations increased more than their urban footprint. In the case of Toronto, it drastically changed.”

Neptis’s preliminary analysis showed that while the GTA population increased by 19 per cent between 1991 and 2001 and by 18 per cent between 2001 and 2011, the rate of urban land consumption dropped dramatically from 24 per cent in the first decade, to 7 per cent in the second. Burchfield notes, however, that while land consumption has slowed, other problems remain.

“We’re not saying that we solved the sprawl problem,” said Burchfield. “We still have other issues such as congestion.”

One of the key takeaways from the analysis of the four city regions is that despite each having very different policy contexts—Burchfield notes that Vancouver has particularly strong growth policies, whereas Edmonton has very few—in all cases the urban footprint decreased, suggesting that the residential housing market is leading the charge for denser, more compact development.

Ryerson University School of Urban and Regional Planning director and associate professor **Chris De Sousa** said that Canadian consumers and the local context stand in stark contrast to the United States, which helps explain Neptis’s findings in part.

“If you think of it from the perspective of a developer, a developer is more than happy to put as much sellable product on a piece of land that he [or she] can get away with. The fact that the market is becoming denser, it makes sense. I think generally, the Canadian consumer is content with home size—the attributes of the interior—and less concerned with yard size, and that’s one of the things that allows for more density.”

This shift in residential intensification and land consumption seems to predate implementation of the 2006 *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* and has Neptis asking: Has the province aimed too low in its ambition to curb urban sprawl?

“Our comments regarding the growth plan, was that perhaps it was too unambitious in its targets,” said Burchfield. She noted that one of the only measurable policies in the growth plan are its density targets and the “density alone is not going to deliver the vision of the plan.” In particular, Neptis noted in an [October 2013 report](#) that municipalities may be over designating the amount of land they need for growth.

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• Marcy Burchfield

“With [the results of the upcoming study], it may further support that there may be an over designation of land.”

Burchfield noted that regional municipalities such as Peel Region are looking at the white belt lands to accommodate some of its anticipated growth, but these preliminary results suggest that those lands are not needed.

“We’re already developing in a denser way... so why aren’t we looking at other ways to accommodate that growth?” said Burchfield. “What’s the role of government versus the market when the market is delivering denser development? Policy is supposed to be leading the market. I think this report takes it into question, particularly in Ontario.”

De Sousa, however, said that even if the market was dictating denser residential development in advance of

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POUNDING THE PAVEMENT

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If the region lost its current rating it would require taxes to go up or services to be cut, which is unpopular in the current economic climate.

“When you have high unemployment cutting services is not necessarily the right way to go,” said Anderson.

A big issue in the election will be about ways of finding efficiencies in government spending, said Anderson. Savings can be found by looking at how services are delivered by the upper and lower tiers of government, he added.

“This is something council will have to look at seriously. Hopefully there will be debate about where services are delivered and from who,” said Anderson.

As the next regional council looks at ways to cut costs, the region is also seeking further investment from the other levels of government.

“Durham has been left behind on transit investments from the province and federal government unlike Toronto, York and Peel,” said Anderson. “If [the province] really wants an integrated transit system [it’s] going to have to invest some



Durham regional chair
Roger Anderson

SOURCE:
DURHAM REGION

transit dollars in Durham Region.”

Bus rapid transit for Durham-Scarborough is one of the priority projects in Metrolinx’s The Big Move. Anderson said increasing transit is important for Durham given how many people in the region commute to Toronto every day. As the region is expected to grow to around 1.19 million by 2041 it is important for both the expansion of transit and creation of jobs locally, to keep congestion at bay.

Anderson also has a request for the federal government—asking it to make a decision on the Pickering airport. The proposed airport has long been an issue in the region. The most recent

development was an announcement by former finance minister **Jim Flaherty** saying that plans for the airport were being reviewed in June 2013.

“The airport in Pickering has to be decided one way or the other,” said Anderson. “It’s got to be moving forward or [it’s] got to stop putting people through another 42 years of indecision.”

Currently Whitby-based dentist **Michael Deegan** is the only person running against Anderson in the regional chair race. [nru](#)

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the growth plan, the growth plan had—and continues to have—a positive effect on creating denser, more complete communities in the GTA, even before it officially came into effect. For starters, De Sousa said, anticipation of the growth plan being implemented helped shift developer attitudes.

“Knowing that [the growth plan] was coming forced [developers] to densify, but also to be more strategic. They could point to the growth plan as an excuse [for denser development],” De Sousa said.

He added that having the province looking over the shoulders of its municipalities has also had a positive effect.

“The presence of the growth plan—whether or not the numbers are based on the right targets of population and density—just having it present makes municipalities conscious that they have

to consider how their growth is going to happen over time.”

De Sousa added that while the growth plan may not have been ambitious, it’s only in its first iteration.

“The fact that we could get a growth plan in place is enviable from a U.S. perspective. I don’t think you could come in with a growth plan. ... We can always go back now and tweak and make it tougher if we wanted, but I would say when you’re first implementing a plan that’s going to intervene in the market, it’s often difficult. You’re going to make it a bit more flexible and a little less demanding.”

Burchfield said that Neptis is currently breaking down the results, hoping to move from a regional perspective on sprawl to looking at the lower-tier municipalities and seeing how each compares. She expects the full report to come in the fall. [nru](#)