



A space to grow without sprawl

'We're going to be living a little closer together': Minister

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Don't look now, but the landscape of Ontario has changed.

Recent amendments and additions to the legislative framework of the province mean that the rules governing planning have been rewritten. On paper at least, the bad old days of endless sprawl are over, replaced by a new regime that values higher density and higher quality development. It will take time before the results of the changes are visible, but they will happen.

"It's a 25-year plan," says David Caplan, Ontario's minister of public infrastructure renewal. "What we have put in place is a blueprint for how we're going to grow over the next few decades. The first thing we've done is say where you don't want growth to happen – that's absolutely critical – then we've said where we do want it to grow."

Caplan is referring to the province's plans for the greenbelt and for growth, which seek to protect environmentally sensitive areas such as the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Niagara Escarpment and the Rouge Valley, and concentrate development in designated "nodes" such as Barrie, Mississauga, Markham, Kitchener/Waterloo and, of course, Toronto.

"We want to make it so you don't have to get into your car for two or three hours daily to go to work or to shop," Caplan explains. "Many people have told us this should have happened 20 years ago. We're going to be living a little closer together. It's about greening as well as growth."

As Ontario's minister of municipal affairs and housing, John Gerretsen, points out, "It's about controlling gridlock as well as sprawl. It's easy to do greenfields development; municipalities like that. But what we're talking about is greater intensification along transportation routes. Farmland has to be protected. So now the province has set the ground rules for development. It's up to municipalities to update their Official Plans so that they're in line with the new provincial policies."

At the same time, cities in Ontario have been given more control over planning, though this must be done within the rules established in the growth plan.

So, for example, by 2015, a minimum of 40 per cent of new housing must be constructed within the existing urban footprint. In most jurisdictions in Ontario, the current rate is 15 per cent. In Vancouver, it's 70 per cent. The difference is what we call sprawl.

In addition to this, cities now have the power to get more specific about the form that growth will take. This also means architectural control implemented through mechanisms such as a design review panel.

Though the Ontario Municipal Board stays, its mandate has shifted in an important way. Whereas in the past, the OMB was required to "have regard to" municipal decisions, it must now "be consistent with" those decisions. This may sound pretty dry, but it's one of those changes that has the power to alter the course of development in Ontario. This is something that desperately needs to happen, and now the process has started.

So far, local reaction has been muted; as so often seems the case, foreign response has been more enthusiastic. Last year, the American Planning Association gave the Daniel Burnham Award to Ontario's Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

In other words, now we are at the point where we will see just how committed Torontonians and Ontarians are to sustainability. We're still not paying the full cost of the services we consume, but the days of \$2 a litre gas, and road tolls and the like, aren't far away.

Resistance will be stiff but ultimately futile. Indeed, when future historians look back at the last half of the 20th century, when vehicular addiction spiralled out of control, they will shake their heads and wonder: What were they thinking?

Indeed, what *are* we thinking?

Regardless, the days of reckoning are finally upon us. Think of it as the calm before the storm. By the time the clouds have cleared, we might just have our house in order. Canada, or at least our part of it, might no longer be a dinosaur.

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