

## Urban sprawl

Resurrecting the suburban dream means controlling population explosion, managing health risk and developing livable, connected communities where residents don't rely on oil to get to their jobs

# The home stretch

Linda White works at a non-profit organization in Toronto helping others build healthy, inclusive communities in Ontario.

At the end of her workday, the 46-year-old mother of two teens endures an egregiously slow 35-km drive eastward on Highway 401. And then while preparing dinner at her house in Whitby, she watches the steady stream of traffic pass by, as commuters make their way home to the numerous suburbs that envelop Durham Region.

Her husband teaches at a local school, which allows him to enjoy the best aspects of living in a small town, without paying the penalty of a long commute.

For many, though, "it's not about the dream of being in a rural community and bumping into your neighbours at the grocery store," White says. "It's not like that at all. People are working till really late. Then they are chauffeuring their kids around on the weekends."

White is among a growing number of Ontarians who are realizing that the population explosion of recent years—the Golden Horseshoe area is the fastest-growing region in Canada—is contributing to an urban sprawl that negatively impacts on the quality of our lives.

The key to making existing suburban communities work, she says, is smart growth and planning to ensure that local employment and services develop, along with the housing to create connected, livable communities, rather than simply bedroom communities of Toronto-bound commuters.

If she and more of her neighbours could work locally, as her husband does, commuter gridlock—and the greenhouse gas emissions produced by the traffic—would be substantially reduced.

In fact, the intensification of existing urban areas, rather than simply the scattering of more low-density suburban housing further and further afield, is exactly what the Ontario government prescribes in its Greenbelt Plan and Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

The Greenbelt, which stipulates land where urban growth cannot take place, provides a solution to contain urban sprawl—the extent to which the conversion of farm and rural land to other uses exceeds the rate of population growth, says Mark Winfield, an environment professor at York University.

"There are good reasons to expand the Greenbelt area," he says, adding that the government's recently announced proposed amendments to allow municipalities to request further expansion of their neighbouring Greenbelt lands into lands not yet zoned for development are "fundamentally the right idea."

If the Greenbelt area were larger, he explains, it would be more effective at preventing the "leap-



THOMAS BOLLMANN

Linda White, above, with her teenagers, says living in Whitby and working in Toronto is "not the dream of being in a rural community." People tend to work late, she says, and then they are "chauffeuring kids around on the weekends."

frogging" of development to the opposite side of designated land, as has happened in the Simcoe area.

According to the Neptis Foundation, a non-profit group that provides non-partisan research into smart urban growth, another 260,000 rural acres will be urbanized by 2031—an area almost double the size of Toronto—if development in Ontario continues at the current pace. And, Neptis warns, if our car dependence continues, over the next 27 years, commuting times will rise by 300 per cent and carbon dioxide emissions by 42 per cent.

Meanwhile, urban sprawl and our over-reliance on the automobile take much of the blame for the growing problem of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, stress and even depression, according to a landmark report by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO). The statistics are staggering: in Canada, obesity rates for children ages 2 to 17 have almost tripled during the past 25 years, to hit 26 per cent.

"This car dependency is a killer," says Dr. Riina Bray, a family physi-

cian and one of the CPSO report's authors, who herself moved with her family in June from Toronto to King City.

In fact, muses Dr. Bray, there should be an OHIP billing code for sprawl-related illness, "to see what the cost really is."

Since 1967, there was an almost 300 per cent increase in developed land in the GTA. At this rate, another area almost double the size of Toronto may be urbanized by 2031.

