

A bold vision for the Golden Horseshoe

Growth Plan leads to shift in how Ontario develops

RYAN STARR
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It's been a decade since the Ontario government introduced its Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH). It's a framework and vision for the future of a region that covers almost 32,000 square kilometres and includes large cities, rapidly growing suburban municipalities, mid-sized centres, small towns, villages and rural areas.

Ten years on, the Growth Plan has largely been a success story having spurred the creation of complete communities across the GGH that offer a multitude of options for living, working, shopping and playing in vibrant urban centres.

The belief is that these communities can provide a greater choice of housing to meet the needs of people at all stages of life, while aiming to reduce gridlock by improving access to a greater range of transportation choices.

The Growth Plan has led to a shift in the way Ontario's cities are being built. A greater proportion of new residential development is now being concentrated in existing urban areas, an approach known as intensification.

This type of growth encourages the development of density in designated growth areas, building up, not out, resulting in mixed-use projects that combine housing, retail and commercial uses. These complete communities offer home-seekers a variety of housing types to choose from, from high-rise and mid-rise condos to townhomes and more traditional detached and semi-detached houses.

And much of this denser development is occurring in areas that are served by transit and cycling infrastructure, helping to ease congestion and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions (Markham and Vaughan are two examples of transit-oriented growth areas in the GGH that are well aligned with the province's Growth Plan goals).

"There's huge demand from the public to be located in truly livable communities," says Franz Hartmann, executive director of the Toronto Environmental Alliance.

"They want to be close to the places they can shop at without needing to drive."

This creates a benevolent circle where people moving to these communities means a critical population mass is established that can support a broader range of shops and services, alongside other essential neighbourhood amenities like community centres, parks and public art.



MARCUS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe has encouraged intensifying development of designated growth areas.

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BURKHARD MAUSBERG
FRIENDS OF THE GREENBELT
FOUNDATION CEO

All of it makes neighbourhoods economically viable and sustainable for the long-term. And the more compact they are, the more efficient these areas are for municipalities to service.

"Building infrastructure for complete communities is a lot less expensive than building infrastructure for sprawl," Hartmann says.

Burkhard Mausberg, Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation CEO, agrees. "The Growth Plan is ensuring we grow smarter and stop paving over farmland, destroying wetlands, and cutting down trees to build ever-sprawling car-dependent neighbourhoods," says Mausberg, whose organization was created to protect the Greenbelt, and complement the

province's smart growth policy. Representing a total area of nearly two million acres, the Greenbelt is among the largest and best protected of its kind in the world.

"The goal was to protect precious countryside and wilderness from unnecessary development," Hartmann says.

"And it's succeeded — it's stopped bad urban sprawl from encroaching on valuable lands."

The Greenbelt enjoys strong public backing. A recent survey released by Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation found 90 per cent of Ontario residents view the Greenbelt as one of the most important contributors to this province's future, a sentiment that's no doubt shaped by the corresponding consumer shift in recent years.

"There's wonderful support for local food, and for the farmers who grow that food, many of whom live and farm on the Greenbelt," Hartmann says.

Indeed, the Greenbelt grows 55 per cent of Ontario's fruit and 13 per cent of its vegetables, according to Friends of the Greenbelt. All told, the regional agricultural

system generates \$9 billion in land-based activity each year, more than oil and gas extraction, mineral extraction, forestry and fisheries combined, notes Mausberg.

It also provides 160,000 jobs via the 856,000 acres of farmland and 5,500 farms contained in the Greenbelt, with agriculture far and away the most significant use of the lands.

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"It's also an economic powerhouse that allows us to eat well and live well."

The Greenbelt is a key complement to the province's smart growth vision, but it faces threats as it enters its second decade of existence. None greater than the push to have some of its lands released for new greenfield development (that is, development where none has been before). Mausberg says there are currently more than 600 such requests totaling thousands of acres.

What could that look like? New highways, pipelines, hydro corridors and sprawling, car-dependent subdivisions, according to research by the David Suzuki Foundation, that could fragment natural and agricul-

tural systems and enable leapfrog development outside the Greenbelt's borders — the type of sprawl these plans were specifically intended to prevent.

Messing with the Greenbelt would be a mistake, Mausberg says, breaking up valuable agricultural lands and threatening the viability of the local support systems that service farmers, veterinarians, equipment repair shops, seed suppliers and grain dealers.

"The surrounding infrastructure needed to do successful farming will disappear if the land is fragmented," Mausberg says.

Keith Currie, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, agrees. "You have to protect the entire system," he says, noting that farmland is already under enough pressure from developers who've fragmented the Greenbelt and are snapping up sites on the other side to develop into grandiose estates. That's the case where he lives in Collingwood.

"They're buying land to put up 8,000 square-foot homes, and they don't want anybody around them," Currie laments. "That's definitely not right for growth."

A look at the pros and cons of intensification

Expansion in urban areas can benefit the environment, but add stress to public services

Intensification is the development of a property, site or area at a higher density than currently exists, through development, redevelopment, infill and expansion or conversion of existing buildings.

Pros
 > Reduces demand for greenfield land; agricultural and environmental benefits to not expanding the urban footprint
 > Fits people within a transit corridor; reduces automobile usage with benefits to traffic congestion, greenhouse gas emissions and costs for the resident
 > Helps make transit services more financially viable for municipalities by providing for increased ridership along existing routes
 > Increases potential for affordable

housing opportunities
 > Provides the relocation potential for seniors to housing more conducive to their lifestyle
 > Increased street activity can increase safety, and provide traffic for local businesses
 > Makes better use of existing infrastructure

Cons
 > Parking issues (potentially offset by transit availability)
 > Increased traffic congestion (potentially mitigated by transit as an alternative transportation)
 > Potential stresses on other local services (library, parks, social services) from the increased number of people
 > Higher buildings can cast shadows on surrounding streets, structures, homes or backyards (potentially mitigated by stepping the building back as it goes up)

Sean Deasy
Special to the Star



Before intensification and revitalization of an arterial road.



After intensification and revitalization of an arterial road.

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