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Markham's food belt

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In a nod to advocates of locally grown produce, Markham town council is considering creation of a "food belt" outside currently built up areas. This would effectively freeze outward urban expansion. While developers understandably bristle at such restrictions, there are good reasons to welcome this bold initiative.

Beyond just satisfying ardent "locavores," the food belt would preserve some 2,000 hectares for agriculture, at least until 2031, and it would effectively channel future growth into Markham's existing built-up areas. Such "intensification" would make a great deal of sense. It would allow for the kind of population density that is essential for public transit to work effectively. The alternative – unbridled sprawl, with single-family homes spread across the landscape – offers residents little choice but to drive their cars.

A recent study showing lengthening commutes by motorists across the Greater Toronto Area underlines the importance of replacing sprawl with more concentrated urban populations.

Markham was already aiming to provide for 60 per cent of its growth through intensification, especially along busy Yonge St. and Highway 7. That goal should be easier to achieve – and exceed – with other land protected under the new food belt.

Town staff had initially suggested developing 1,000 hectares of this surrounding green space. But Markham councillors Valerie Burke and Erin Shapero stepped forward with the food belt idea and won unanimous support for consultation on this approach. Council is expected to look at the issue again next month. It deserves serious consideration and emulation elsewhere in the GTA.