

# The region's rise and sprawl

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Smart growth — or outsmarted?

Ontario won international kudos four years ago for Places to Grow, a revolutionary scheme to curb urban sprawl. But it's the nitty-gritty decisions being made in places like Brampton and Markham that will show over the next 20 years whether the plan succeeded.

These two communities have taken very different paths toward meeting the goals set out in Places to Grow, a master strategy for managing population growth intelligently and preserving as much green space as possible.

The contrast is just one of the revelations in a groundbreaking Star analysis of growth plans recently unveiled by the GTA's four regions and 25 municipalities. These plans represent the last best chance to break the stranglehold of ad hoc development that has brought traffic congestion that costs the regional economy \$6 billion a year — and led to a deteriorating quality of life.

Compare:

Markham hired a high-profile visionary, California-based “new urbanist” Peter Calthorpe, to design communities with densities

approaching that of downtown Toronto. It pioneered the idea of suburban intensification, redeveloping areas already built on.

The town also engaged in audacious debates about whether it should urbanize thousands of hectares of prime agricultural land just because it could — and chose not to.

Brampton, meanwhile, is plowing ahead with plans that will make it the hot spot for horizontal growth — a.k.a. sprawl — in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Its plans will end up paving over what remains of thousands of hectares of rural land within the city limits, just as neighbouring Mississauga did.

Municipal governments and developers often point out that traditional suburban development — spread-out, detached-home neighbourhoods whose residents depend on their cars — remains popular, and lucrative. But attitudes are changing as people realize that sprawl also makes it tough to create environmentally and socially sustainable communities with features such as rapid transit.

“Smart growth” is the new buzzword across the GTA. Among other things, it means “intensifying” — building more densely within currently built-up areas.

A key requirement of the province’s big-picture plan is that at least 40 percent of all population growth in each region must be accommodated through intensification.

But that will happen unevenly. The Star’s analysis shows that

maturing cities such as Brampton, Oshawa and Mississauga plan to intensify much less than others in the region, relative to size.

But there's good news, too: Land-needs forecasts show that in 20 years there will still be 36,320 hectares left of "white belt," rural land that is neither part of the protected Greenbelt nor slated for development.

It's all part of a high-stakes game involving huge profits for developers and a boost in tax base for cities. Some 100,000 people arrive here every year. Where will they live?

To analyze what's happening, the Star began with looking at the population targets the province allocated to each of the regions (Halton, Peel, York, Durham, Toronto) — the number of newcomers it expects them to absorb between now and 2031 — and then looked at how those phantom newcomers were being allocated.

Each city is expected to take a certain number of those people. Each then must decide on the number of housing units needed to accommodate them, and create a budget for the amount of land needed for new homes and workplaces.

York University environmental studies professor Mark Winfield, who sits on a provincial smart-growth advisory panel and studies urban sustainability, said the Star's analysis — the first of its kind — raises important questions about how the 2006 Places to Grow plan is playing out.

“On the surface, (the plan) may have given municipalities too much flexibility and enabled some of them to deviate less from the traditional path than the plan sought to and they needed to,” said Winfield.

“You’ve got some strong responses in places like Markham. Toronto itself has stepped up. But in other places the response is somewhat weaker,” said Winfield, after poring over the Star’s numbers. “Mississauga is quite striking.

“You clearly have leaders thinking in a more ambitious and creative way, and you have others who are basically wedded to the sprawl model and trying to respond to the province within that framework.”

Brampton, Winfield points out, pre-empted the growth plan by designating the entire area inside its city limits for urban expansion — including vast stretches of farmland — so it wouldn’t have to justify allowing new growth outside what’s termed the “urban boundary.”

Mississauga, with little room left to expand, plans to absorb just 107,000 more people, a 15 per cent increase, by 2031. By contrast, Toronto is taking on a 23 per cent increase; Markham 55 per cent and Vaughan 68 per cent.

In raw terms, Mississauga is adding only slightly more housing in its built-up areas than Vaughan, Markham or Brampton, although it has a much larger area than the others to which it could direct that growth.

Ontario Infrastructure Minister Bob Chiarelli says he is aware the situation in Mississauga and Brampton “has to be watched very carefully.”

But it’s still early, he says, as municipalities bring their plans into conformity with Places to Grow. He adds that the province won’t hesitate to intervene — as it did when it quashed Durham Region’s controversial expansion plans in Pickering — if local plans don’t meet the guidelines. (So far, York Region’s plan is the only one the province has officially approved.)

Winfield said the province still needs to do a deeper analysis that looks at what’s happening across the GTA, not just the densities being planned, but also the population allocations and the kind of communities being planned.

He says it’s time to assess the impact of the province’s massive interventions in regional planning, including creating the Greenbelt — which made a huge swath a no-go zone for developers — and Places to Grow, which oversees what’s left.

More questions than answers are emerging as the local plans appear, the Star found. For instance, Markham may be planning one of the densest suburban communities in North America, but that project depends on public transit, including an extended Yonge subway and light rail, that the province hasn’t committed to paying for.

And big questions remain about how and when fast-growing edge cities like Milton will pay for infrastructure, like hospitals

and transit.

Managing growth is a complex problem.

Critics say Places to Grow is forcing too much growth to places not ready for it, while too little is directed toward places that can and should take on more.

Take Mississauga, for example: The city hopes to meet the goals while treading gingerly — building intensively in designated urban growth centres and along so-called “nodes” and “corridors,” but avoiding destabilizing neighbourhoods and angering residents who don’t want towers in their backyards.

Two years ago, a senior planner in Mississauga said the city could easily accommodate double the 100,000 newcomers Peel Region has as a goal — or even triple that, if market demand develops and the province revisits its forecasts.

But recently, John Calvert, another Mississauga planner, was more circumspect about how many more people his city could take on.

“I don’t know; we haven’t done the studies because (the region) are telling us, ‘You are not getting any more,’” said Calvert. “So, why would we study it at this point, above what’s been allocated by the region?”

And therein lies the rub.

Peel, like the other regions, has to ensure that 40 per cent of future population growth comes through infill. It's become a bit of a numbers game as to how its three municipalities achieve that.

The key point is that, together, they can't absorb more new population than the province allotted to Peel. So if Mississauga builds more homes and takes in more people, fewer homes can be built in Brampton and Caledon, either within built-up areas or on virgin land zoned for development.

Meanwhile, Brampton, whose own studies show it can do more to intensify, is competing against itself. The city — both to satisfy the industry and to rake in more development fees — also wants to put more housing out on rural land that speculators are holding.

Mostly-rural Caledon wants a share of growth to boost its tax base.

To keep all three municipalities happy, they've devised a compromise scenario to put to the province: Caledon gets some growth. Brampton and Mississauga take on less intensification than they could — yet together they still manage to meet the province's targets.

Some planners and politicians say the 40 percent intensification target is just too radical for suburban cities accustomed to sprawling out endlessly.

Others, given how much sprawl has happened already, say the

density targets aren't high enough, and that Mississauga, along with Brampton and Oshawa, should be required to take on more growth than current plans call for.

"We needed to be more ambitious," Winfield says.

Planners in Mississauga and Durham insist they've proposed reasonable plans. "It's not just simple math, it's community building," said Roger Saunders, a senior planner with Durham. "We're trying to plan for a reasonable way in which these communities will evolve into more dense urban communities."

A big wild card is Toronto, which is taking on the lion's share.

In the past decade, Toronto has added 100,000 new housing units, more than the total housing stock in Pickering, Ajax and Whitby combined (94,075 units) — nearly all in apartment-form buildings.

If the market for apartment-style homes grows, planners say, green areas slated for development could go unpaved longer than expected, well beyond the 2031 horizon.

Against this backdrop, the province faces immediate challenges from developers and speculators who discover the land they've invested millions in has been excluded from the plans. (See next page.)

Jeffrey Davies, a prominent lawyer who has acted for the development industry, compares wrestling with all these forces

to the challenge faced by a “python about to try and swallow an elephant.”

“The python is the (planning system) and the elephant is the accumulation of all the appeals” that can be expected to pop up at the Ontario Municipal Board, Davies said.

But Chiarelli is unperturbed. The province, he says, isn’t worried about appeals, because charting a sustainable future for the fastest growing mega-region in North America — the Greater Golden Horseshoe — is just too important.

That the province rejected a 1,000-hectare expansion in Pickering and is willing to take on Durham Region at the OMB is proof “that it is serious about curbing sprawl,” he says.

“I think there should be a very clear message to the regions that we mean business.”