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Places To Grow: Still Unsustainable

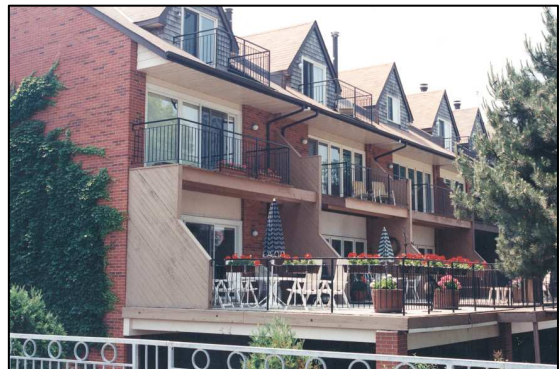
Municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) have incorporated provincially-mandated “Places To Grow” targets for both population and employment growth into their official plans for development between now and 2031. The plans also conform to provincial legislation that require at least 40% of all residential units built from 2015 onwards outside of Toronto to be built within existing urban boundaries, via intensification. The remaining population and employment growth that is to occur on what is now rural lands must be built at an overall minimum density of 50 residents and jobs per gross hectare.

Unfortunately, regional municipalities are taking the minimum targets as maximums. As a result, within a single generation, over 425 square kilometers of rural and agricultural lands in the GTHA will have been lost by 2031 – an area almost the size of the cities of Brampton and Mississauga combined (see table below).

Is this progress? Considering that prior to Places To Grow legislation much more land would have been lost, with less intensification and lower greenfield densities, yes. But by no means will the new minimums bring environmental sustainability or the efficiencies needed for the 21st century. As the region grows by 3,300,000 more people and jobs between 2009 and 2031, more progress is essential. Otherwise, problems will grow:

- Many more people will have to be fed from less arable land. Global and regional food security as a result of climate destabilization and energy costs of production will be at risk;
- Transportation will continue to be highly dominated by travel by automobile⁽¹⁾; traffic congestion and travel costs to households (average > \$10,000 per year) and to the economy will increase;
- Per capita costs of public infrastructure (roads, pipes) and services will remain high – much higher than for compact, mixed urban environments;
- Greenhouse gas emissions from energy consumption will increase;
- Overall environmental conditions will worsen.

Urban planners and municipal Councils can do much better than meeting minimum requirements. Not to do so compromises environmental sustainability and misses opportunities for cost efficiencies. A few forward-thinking urban development projects that are compact and efficient are being built across the region, but a scattering of individual projects do not a sustainable city make. Consistent and city-wide on-the-ground practices that implement official plan intentions in support of sustainability are not happening, or only support legislated minimums. Moreover, numerical targets for reducing greenhouse gases that are linked to urban form or reductions in vehicle kilometres have not been set by municipalities.



Relatively high overall urban densities and an intimate mixing of uses (and not only in city centres) are essential for success. In the relatively low density environments of the 905 area around Toronto,

opportunities for intensification beyond the 40% residential requirement can and should be pursued. For greenfield development, municipalities are presented with a blank slate. Densities can be much higher than the 50 minimum. Doubling the overall resident and job density to 10,000 or more per square kilometer, applied across entire designated greenfield areas, is a reasonable and doable target. If well-designed, these environments can be highly marketable⁽²⁾. Rural/Agricultural land losses would be cut by more than 50%, public infrastructure and services (especially transit) would be much more efficient and affordable, and energy impacts on the environment and economy would be reduced. The long term well-being of people would be improved.



In a city that is environmentally and economically sustainable, transportation is no longer dependent on travel by automobile. Almost everyone is able to easily walk to daily services, or easily walk or take public transit to work. This implies mixing of uses such that a high proportion of buildings are multi-storey and multi-use (residential and non-residential), except for the most disruptive activities, and that building setbacks (residential as well as non-residential) are minimal – in other words, environments that are more urban than suburban. But until

transportation planners see more land use decisions in support of sustainable transportation, they will continue to assume that travel demand growth will remain focused on travel by automobile⁽³⁾.

As density and mixing of uses increase, so do energy savings. Moving aggressively to building forms that reduce per-unit building surface exposure to the elements, such as attached homes (townhomes) and multi-storey multi-unit buildings, makes both long-term environmental and economic sense. District heating and cooling systems (for example, sourcing energy from under every athletic field in a municipality) would add another layer of efficiency, and further reduce the economic drain of imported fuels.

A summary of some of the measures that GTHA municipalities can implement to move more aggressively towards sustainability can be found at <http://www.suda.ca/f/018 - Oil Crunch part 2.pdf>.

Note 1: Currently, outside the City of Toronto, about 78% of all daily trips are taken by automobile and less than 9% by public transit. Metrolinx (the transportation planning authority for the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area) targets a 60% overall increase in peak period trips by public transit in 25 years in the GTHA. Trips by automobile will increase by 28%, but decrease to 70% of all trips.

Note 2: To see a one square kilometre conceptual example of a family-friendly high density urban environment, visit <http://www.suda.ca/newburgx.html>. See also <http://www.suda.ca/HAAS.html> for SUDA's survey of acceptability of compact housing.

Note 3: As an example of how density and separation of uses affects transportation, the overall density of the City of Mississauga is 45 residents and jobs per hectare (very close to greenfield density minimums set by the Province for greenfield development), yet 83% of daily trips are by automobile. The transit modal share is only 10% (7% local + 3% GO?). Per Transportation Tomorrow Survey 2006.

Population and Employment Growth to 2031 in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area Excluding Toronto		
Population	2031	5,540,000
	2006	3,660,000
Increase to 2031		1,880,000
Ontario average household size		2.63
Residential units		714,748
Intensification Units phased in to 40% by 2015		250,162
Avg. household size for intensification		2.0
Intensification population		500,324
Greenfield population growth 2009-2031		1,379,676
Employment	2031	2,690,000
	2006	1,800,000
Increase 2009 to 2031		890,000
Estimate for intensification @ 10%		89,000
Greenfield employment		801,000
Total greenfield growth to 2031 for Population + Employment		2,180,676
Targeted overall greenfield development density per gross hectare		50
Total hectares or rural land lost 2009 to 2031		43,614
Square kilometre equivalent		436
		107,771 acres
Brampton + Mississauga are 523 sq.km. combined.		
Rural Lands Lost excludes natural areas within urbanizing area.		

SUDA is a registered Canadian charitable organization whose mission it is to foster a healthy natural environment by providing information about sustainable city-building, by providing information to organizations and individuals in the Toronto region through outreach, research and analysis, networking and electronic communications. Your financial contribution is welcome, and can be made at <http://www.suda.ca/Invest.html>.