

A sprawling disaster - Ford's plan for Ontario

According to Halton Hills councillor Jane Fogal, development sprawl will occur if the proposed changes to the Places to Grow Act go unchecked.

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The Ford government, through a rapid fire series of decisions and legislation, has successfully rewritten the rules for municipal planning in a manner that is very favourable to developers and very unfavourable to municipalities trying to build healthy, complete communities and address climate change.

Since 2005, municipalities in Ontario have been obliged to conform to the Places to Grow Act. This Act sought to reign in sprawl by requiring municipalities to meet intensification goals when planning to accommodate growth. Also development on new urban areas, generally farmland, was required to meet higher density targets as well.

The Greenbelt Act was also approved to ensure greenspace and natural areas remain intact to protect the ecological function of the land.

Over the past 15 years, Ontarians also saw enormous investments by Metrolinx in GO Transit and additional funding for municipal transit systems which benefitted from intensification.

The Green Energy Act and Cap and Trade provided incentives for green energy production and funding for transit and energy efficiencies.

The province shifted funding away from new higher order highways. In the case of the GTA West highway, the cancellation came after an expert panel found that transportation goals could be reached through other interventions such as creating subsidized truck lanes on highway 407 or introducing congestion pricing. These alternatives could be achieved in a much shorter timeframe, would cost less and be

more effective, all without the environmental damage or increased greenhouse gas emissions.

And then everything changed

The Conservatives, led by Doug Ford, won the provincial election in June 2018. Although changes to municipal planning and weakening of environmental protections were not part of the Ford election platform, they have become a major focus both before and during the pandemic.

The Cap and Trade system and Green Energy Act were cancelled and green projects under construction were ordered to be dismantled. Incentives for electric vehicles and energy retrofits were cancelled.

Reviving the GTA West/Highway 413

Shortly after taking power, Premier Ford announced the revival of the GTA West 400 series highway (413) with the launch of a fast-tracked environmental assessment. Reviving the 413 was not included in Ford's platform and was a surprise to most people. There was no consideration given to the alternative solutions recommended in the expert panel's report. However, there is no doubt that major landowners along the GTA West corridor will reap benefits as it is normal for land along a 400 series highway to be rezoned for development. Although the construction of the highway alone will have significant negative impacts due to destruction of sensitive environmental areas and farmland, the anticipated adjacent development will do far more harm in the long run. This will result in sprawl along the length of the new highway.

Amendment #1 to the Places to Grow Act and the provincial policy statement

The Places to Grow Act and the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) work together to help municipalities build complete healthy communities. The Ford government has changed a number of important legislated requirements through the introduction of Amendment #1 and amendments to the PPS.

Changes that will promote sprawl include

- Amendment #1 stipulates minimum population growth goals but removed maximums, meaning that developers can push for greater population increases.
- Density goals have been reduced, meaning there can be more single family dwellings -- ie. sprawl.
- 'Market Demand' was explicitly added as justification for planning the housing mix. Since we know there is a demand for single family dwellings, the developers will argue for it based on the market. Expect more sprawl.
- The planning horizon has been moved out to 2051. This means that today's municipal councils must approve plans to accommodate population growth to 2051. It pushes designating rural land now to provide housing up to 30 years into the future. The net result is that developers who have speculated on future development lands don't have to wait 20 years to get permission to build. They get permission for all of the land required for 30 years of housing development now.
- The deadline for municipalities to approve their 30 year plan is summer 2022, conveniently before the next provincial election. Should Ford lose the election, it doesn't matter. The land will have been approved for development and cancelling approved land has never been done before.
- Public input into planning for the next 30 years is scheduled to happen during the pandemic when it is impossible to hold in-person public meetings or workshops.

Consequences

We are living in a time when climate change is causing weather related events such as massive destructive hurricanes, frightening wild fires, famine, property damage, floods, massive loss of species, etc. etc.

Due to this emergency cities around the world are working hard at reducing their greenhouse gas emissions by holding the line on sprawl, creating complete healthier communities, reducing car dependence and protecting farmland.

Ontario is moving in the opposite direction, purposely encouraging sprawl, making people more dependent on cars and commuting for hours each day, making transit less effective, building new highways that will encourage more driving, devoting more space to parked cars and less to greenspace for people, paving over ecological areas that support our water resources.

There is only one logical explanation for this massive failure to lead Ontario in a positive healthy direction – greed. Just follow the money. The developers want to make more money and Ford has made it much easier for them to do that.

What can we do about it?

1. Municipalities should refuse to meet the timetable set out to be compliant with the Places to Grow Act. There is no reason to rush to identify lands that won't be available for 10 more years at a minimum. Planning anything this big should wait until after the pandemic and be after the next provincial election. The people of Ontario deserve an opportunity to understand what is being proposed and an opportunity to say how their communities will grow.
2. Municipalities should refuse to open up their urban boundaries at this time. Although making the boundaries permanently fixed is the best solution, they are always open to review by future councils. Developers won't like that so they will appeal the decision. The appeal process will take months to sort out, by which time the election will have taken place and perhaps sanity will return with a new government.
3. People can lobby their MPPs and tell them that this is not what they voted for. Protests such as we saw regarding the 413 highway actually work. The uproar over Ford telling developers he would open up the Greenbelt for development blew up and he walked that idea back.
4. To address the problem of affordability, which Ford said was the impetus for the planning act changes, municipalities should demand that all subdivision plans include 10 per cent affordable units that will be available for the municipality to purchase. The municipality can then require that these units be built to the highest energy efficiency level. Upon purchase the municipality would rent the affordable units at rates to pay for the carrying costs. The cost of the added energy upgrades would be offset by the reduced energy costs. The net result would be a guaranteed increase in rental properties and increased energy efficiency in the housing stock. It would also contribute to achieving a complete community with a mix of housing types and affordability.

Conclusion

The priorities of the current government have resulted in fundamental changes to how Ontario evolves. Unfortunately this is out of step with the circumstances and challenges we are facing today. The climate change emergency gets worse by the day and cannot be ignored by any level of government.

The solutions to our problems exist but to use those solutions there must be a will to act in the best interests of all the people. We need the government to change course and do the right things. Incentivizing sprawl and car culture is no longer acceptable.

Now is the time to push back and call for the government to stop enriching developers and start tackling affordable housing, greenhouse gas emissions, the loss of significant wetlands and habitats and the loss of some of the best agricultural lands in Canada.