

BORDERS AND INFRASTRUCTURE: Land Use Planning and Development

Issue:

The Province of Ontario has responsibility for establishing a broad framework for land use planning and development. However, lately, the province has been intervening in detail in local planning matters. It is important that we restore proper balance to the system.

Background:

Traditionally, the Province has assumed this role through the guidance and direction on broad planning-related issues through such documents approved in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Parkway Belt West Plan, the Niagara Escarpment Plan, and more recently through the approval of the Oakridge's Moraine Plan and Greenbelt Plan. These initiatives have been primarily focused on the GTA to deal with growth pressures competing with the protection of natural features, and the need to establish a logical evolution in the development of distinct, identifiable communities. More recently, the Province has released its newest growth plan entitled Places to Grow. This represents one of the most intrusive approaches to long-term planning that has ever been adopted by the Province.

With this proposed growth plan, the Province is now beginning to cross the line in controlling matters that more appropriately should remain the responsibility of local municipal governments. The Plan not only identifies growth areas but also allocates how much growth municipalities must accept. Rather than providing specific targets, the Province is now establishing specific population levels. In addition, the Province is also dictating the precise number of hectares that have to be set aside to accommodate provincially driven growth projections.

This approach fails to recognize the specific needs and characteristics of each municipality. For example, it is assumed that each hectare of land has the same characteristics and the same potential to accommodate future growth. This does not take into account land ownership patterns in some municipalities that hinder the land assembly required to accommodate new communities. Nor does it take into account the presence of natural features, the ability to create new communities as opposed to extensions of existing subdivisions, and the extent to which natural physical boundaries already exist.

The provincial objective of containing urban sprawl through the encouragement of intensification and the establishment of a logical and sustainable pattern of growth can be achieved at the local level through provincial policy directives that can lead to appropriate official plan policies at the local level to encourage intensification and to control growth through proper staging policies. Beyond this very restrictive approach to establishing new communities, the Province is becoming actively involved in formal opposition to municipal initiatives.

For example, in Hamilton, after designating the Hamilton Airport as a major growth centre and constructing a new provincial highway to provide access to the airport, the Province has now appealed the City's plans to open up industrial land around the airport to take full advantage

of the new highway. Clearly, these are local matters that do not have any broad provincial interest beyond their consistency with provincial growth directives and provincial infrastructure investment.

On the other hand, on a truly provincial issue - the Mid Peninsula Corridor, it appears that the Province is taking a less active role and has backed away from the proactive strategy that is required to bring this project forward in a timely manner. This is a clear example of a legitimate provincial interest that requires greater provincial initiative to link the GTA with the Niagara Region and the US border to take full advantage of the economic development potential of establishing greater connections to the US border. This is consistent with the provision of the Places to Grow plan that recognizes the importance of cross-border trade with the United States.

The Places to Grow plan is somewhat unclear as to the timing horizon for the adoption of long-term provincial strategies. Within the context of the report, the plan discusses issues that will be dealt with by communities over the next 30 years. However, it continues by noting that the plan is a framework for managing growth to the year 2031. A 20-year time frame should be the minimum consideration for development for any community within the GTA. The possibility to consider growth options for 30 years is necessary to allow for the proper development of new communities, the planning implementation of appropriate infrastructure, and to allow for the consideration of special characteristics of each municipality.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Continue to adopt broad strategies and a framework for development for at least the next 30 years. These strategies should include accelerating the planning and implementation of the Mid Peninsula Corridor to take full advantage of future economic opportunities that would be created with this infrastructure.
2. Encourage municipalities to adopt plans that are based on a 20-to 30-year planning horizon.
3. Refrain from interfering with land allocation or distribution of land areas or uses within area municipalities, but encourage municipalities to implement the Places to Grow plan through local official plan policies.
4. Only issue policy directives that recognize specific characteristics of individual communities by allowing flexibility in determining future land use needs in response to individual differences attributed to land ownership patterns, potential land monopoly situations, the presence of important natural features, and the establishment of logical, long-term urban boundaries.