



Nature at risk!

urban sprawl in Ontario and how to stop it

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Ask anyone who grew up at the edge of a large, southern Ontario city what it used to look like — and what it looks like now. Places where they used to ride bikes beside farm fields, or hike in forests or along quiet streams, are now paved over with malls, industries and housing. We can't grow on like this! There are smarter ways to grow — better for nature and for people.

Sprawl . . . and what causes it

Sprawl uses a lot more land for each person. It separates where people live from where they shop, work, go to school and enjoy recreation. People are forced into cars. The “convenience” store is now a five-minute drive away, not a five-minute walk.

Sprawl has many causes. Governments don't stick to land-use plans. They encourage sprawl with highway construction and new water and sewer lines. And more and more people can

afford to own a car (or two), making suburban living possible.

Sprawl results from increasing population in addition to more land being used per person. In the U.S., studies show that about half of sprawl relates to an increase in land consumed for each city resident. The other half of American sprawl relates to increased population in cities. It's likely the situation is similar here.

By 2016, Ontario's population is expected to grow to 14 million people. About a quarter of the increase will be due to more births, with about three-quarters

from immigration, mostly from other parts of Canada. The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is projected to absorb 62 percent of Ontario's population growth, with 1.3 million more people by 2016, totaling 6.6 million. The broad belt around the GTA — including Barrie, Hamilton, St. Catharines, Guelph, Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge, Brantford — will take in 19 percent of Ontario's population growth, or almost half a million people.

The challenge will be to design our communities to accommodate more people without rampant urban sprawl — and to protect nature for future generations.



Sprawl is bad for nature

Sprawl destroys wildlife habitat. Forests, wetlands, meadows and valleys are cut, bulldozed, filled in and paved over to make room for urban expansion. Farmland is destroyed, too, so food can't be grown near cities. Paving over farms and natural areas disrupts the delicate water balance among rain and snow, groundwater aquifers, and rivers and streams. New roads slice through scarce natural habitats, threatening populations of forest-interior birds such as scarlet tanager and ovenbird that require large woodlands.

Sprawl causes water and air pollution. Laden with contaminants such as oil, pesticides and road salt, water after storms is channeled through pipes into nearby waterways. Car dependence over transit and increased use of truck freight over rail are causing traffic gridlock on our highways and smog choking our lungs. Air pollution causes nearly 2,000 premature deaths in Ontario each year. Gridlock is not only bad for our health, it's bad for our economy too: Traffic congestion in the GTA and Hamilton areas already costs \$2 billion a year from delays in truck deliveries.



Queen's Park policies allow sprawl

The current Ontario government has failed to ensure orderly and cost-effective growth. Instead, the province has required municipalities, counties and regions to expand urban areas often without considering negative impacts on land and nature.

The tax system supports sprawl: The 1996 provincial budget gave a rebate to first-time buyers who choose a newly-constructed home (usually in sprawl areas). The \$2,000 rebate is now a fixture.

Further, the province's \$20 billion SuperBuild Growth Fund, which helps pay infrastructure costs such as highways and sewers, doesn't support public transit.

Curbing sprawl with "smart growth"

Attempts to curb sprawl aren't new. Plans to contain Toronto — to keep the city urban and the countryside rural — were conceived as early as the 1950s.

We have to stop extending highways, sewer systems and water pipes out into

the countryside in anticipation of possible but as-yet unplanned urban growth. For example, there wouldn't have been as much sprawl on the Oak Ridges Moraine during the past decade if it weren't for construction of the York-Durham Sewer System. We first need to decide where it's best to have urban

growth — where it can happen with the least destruction of forests, wetlands and farmland, and the least pollution of our air and water. Only after that has been done is it necessary to figure out road and sewer systems, as part of the overall planning for our communities.

What's new about curbing sprawl is the name — smart growth.

The term was coined in the United States a few years ago to describe a mix of alternatives to “problem growth.” Smart growth assumes that cities will grow, and embraces a number of attractive features:

- Conserves important natural areas and farmland by maintaining clear urban boundaries.
- Provides incentives for existing communities to grow where public utilities such as sewers and water pipes already exist. This includes reclaiming older buildings and re-developing abandoned industrial lands (“brownfields”).
- Creates vibrant, pedestrian-friendly communities with a range of housing types and costs.
- Provides alternatives to cars such as convenient, efficient public transit, with development located near existing transit routes.
- Fully involves citizens in helping design their communities’ future. Collaborations and public-private partnerships are keys to smart-growth success.



Gregor Beck



Linda Pim

Growing bigger *and* better

The City of Toronto can't grow any wider around the edges — its boundaries are fixed. Although the city is forecast to grow by about half a million people over the next 30 years, city planners recently proposed that Toronto could help curb sprawl by welcoming more growth in compact, livable urban renewal projects. Toronto could thereby accommodate one million more residents. One example is shown above — attractive, new row housing on reclaimed industrial land just steps from a downtown streetcar line.

Smart Growth is Working!

Oregon started to rein in sprawl almost 30 years ago. As a result of laws passed in 1973, each of Oregon's 240 cities is surrounded by an urban growth boundary (UGB), which shows where a city expects to grow. Urban services such as sewers won't be extended beyond the UGB and zoning outside it prohibits urban densities. A UGB can be modified — and some have been — but only if the city complies with statewide planning goals and standards for UGBs.

Maryland has taken a different tack. Since 1997, they've opted for an incentives-based rather than legislated approach by subsidizing economic development only in Priority Growth Areas. Success depends on cooperation of county governments, so while counties have the final say on where growth areas will be, the state won't put up funding if its smart-growth criteria aren't met. The state encourages re-development of abandoned industrial lands and promotes its 'Live Near Your Work' program by providing cash incentives for homebuyers to purchase near their employment.

Smart Growth on the Web

Canada

Canadian Urban Institute
SmartGrowthBC

www.canurb.com
www.smartgrowth.bc.ca

U.S.A.

Smart Growth Network
Smart Growth America
Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse
Sierra Club Challenge to Sprawl

www.smartgrowth.org
www.smartgrowthamerica.com
www.sprawlwatch.org
www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/

Made-in-Ontario Smart Growth

The Ontario government should implement a mix of actions to plan urban growth. These could include:

- ✓ improving urban growth restrictions and natural heritage protections of the Provincial Policy Statement under the Planning Act.
- ✓ requiring municipalities to do land-use planning consistent with provincial policies.
- ✓ in collaboration with municipalities, setting fixed urban growth boundaries so that prime farmlands and natural areas are protected for the future. A good place to start would be the fast-growing cities on and near the Oak Ridges Moraine, as well as Barrie, Kitchener-Waterloo, Guelph and the “Golden Horseshoe.”
- ✓ using the Maryland model of directing infrastructure subsidies only to areas practising smart planning.
- ✓ restoring provincial funding to public transit and promoting integrated regional transit services.
- ✓ fostering dialogue among citizens, planners, municipal councillors, boards of trade, developers and others to determine what smart growth features suit each community.
- ✓ encouraging Ottawa to partner with provincial and municipal governments by flowing housing and transit dollars to smart-growth strategies.

A word of warning:
Beware of those using the term “smart growth” to justify any urban initiative. When public money becomes available for anti-sprawl projects, there’s a great temptation to call *all* growth “smart.” Make sure the “smart” project or activity really is, by evaluating it against the checklist above.

Smart Growth Action Plan

What you can do to protect nature from urban sprawl

- If you agree that the provincial government must guarantee future generations clean air, clean water, woodlands, wetlands and a diversity of wildlife, then please send an action letter to Premier Mike Harris. Tell him you expect a guarantee! Your action letter will support FON’s campaign for provincial land-use planning controls that will protect nature from urban sprawl. Please urge Premier Harris to:
 - “green” the land-use planning system to that it permanently protects natural areas and farmlands outside well-defined urban boundaries
 - restore provincial funding for public transit, and
 - provide incentives for municipalities who want to grow smarter by accommodating new growth within existing urban boundaries
- Write him today!
Premier Mike Harris,
Legislative Building, Queen’s Park,
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1A1,
fax 416-325-7578,
email webprem@gov.on.ca
Or call him at 416-325-1941.
- You can also send an action letter to:
The Honourable Chris Hodgson,
Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing
777 Bay Street, 17th Floor,
Toronto, Ontario M5G 2E5,
fax (416) 585-6470,
email mininfo@mah.gov.on.ca
Or call him at 416-585-7000.
- Encourage your municipal council to plan for smart growth. If your council doesn’t have an environmental advisory committee (EAC) of local citizens, ask for one to be established (for details, see FON’s website).

- Contact FON for more information on smart growth — and starting a smart-growth group in your community.
- Embrace smart growth in your daily life by trying to live near your workplace, choose a home convenient to public transit, and support businesses in your own neighbourhood.

Your voice counts!

Don’t forget to send a copy of your letter to the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. We want to deliver the message to Premier Harris that thousands of Ontarians from across the province want provincial leadership to curb sprawl.

Join Today! Connect to nature through membership in the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

On-line at

www.ontarionature.org

or call 416-444-8419

1-800-440-2366

The Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON) protects Ontario’s nature through research, education, and conservation action. FON champions woodlands, wetlands and wildlife, and preserves essential habitat through its own system of nature reserves. FON is a conservation organization representing 15,000 members and over 110 member groups across Ontario.



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