Greyfield Redevelopment and Smart Growth:

An Evaluation of Three Redevelopment Sites in the Greater Toronto Area

by

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Executive Summary

Greyfields are defined as failing or failed commercial shopping mall sites, and are identified by low levels of pedestrian activity, a high level of store vacancies, a large amount of unused parking, and deteriorating building conditions. Studies focused on the development potential of greyfields have revealed that these sites are prime locations for intensification and mixed-use projects. These findings suggest that the characteristics of greyfields offer an ideal opportunity for 'smart growth' development, since the sites tend to have large lot sizes, are located within existing communities, and generally have lower market value due to the decaying mall structure. This report explores greyfield redevelopment in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to determine whether or not the opportunities presented in past literature have been realized. To explore this issue, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the evaluation criteria that determine whether or not a redevelopment project is a 'smart growth' success?
2. How have greyfield redevelopment projects in the GTA performed, based on these criteria?

Using the most appropriate elements of existing smart growth scorecards and checklists, the following criteria framework has been developed:

SMART GROWTH CRITERIA FRAMEWORK	
SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLE	**PERFORMANCE CRITERIA**
Mix of uses	The project is mixed use (any combination of housing, retail, office, commercial, public buildings, open space, etc.)
	The project adds to the diversity of uses within an existing community
Compact neighbourhoods	For residential: The average number of dwelling units/hectare (including on-site right-of-way and open space – gross density)
	For commercial: There is a high floor-area ratio (exclude structured parking and right-of-way) (i.e. >1 is high and 0.4-0.5 is low)
	The project parking is located where it does not visually dominate the development from the street and allows easy and safe pedestrian access to buildings
	The buildings are located at minimum set-back or at "build to" lines when they exist
Variety of transportation choices	The project is within walking distance of public transit
	The project provides pedestrian amenities for transit (Transit station, structure with seat, roof and schedule information, signage)
	Frequently visited uses are safely accessible without a car (i.e., connects and extends internal path, bikeway or sidewalk systems to external systems)
	The project has an interconnected road system without cul-de-sacs OR the project is located on an existing street network that is interconnected

Diverse housing opportunities	The project offers a mix of housing types and sizes (apartments, condos, townhouses, single-family, studios, 1BR, 2BR, 3BR, etc.)
	The project has units with a wide-range of pricing options that will be sold or leased, with at least 15 percent priced as affordable
	The project increases the diversity of housing options in the immediate neighbourhood
Encourage growth in existing communities	The project is located adjacent to existing infrastructure and servicing
	The project is near at least three of the following: housing, restaurants, retail/convenience/services, schools, recreation centres, offices
Environmental protection	The project avoids critical environmental areas (wetlands, watersheds, streams, etc.) and relieves development pressure on natural resources on or off site.
	The project is located on land that is physically suitable for development (not in floodplains, or on steep slopes, etc.)
	The project proposes to improve degraded environmental resources
Smarter and cheaper infrastructure and green buildings	The project minimizes impervious surfaces to improve stormwater quality and quantity
	The project is energy efficient with buildings designed using green building techniques.
	The project includes use of recycled or “low impact” materials (either for buildings or other)
	The project reuses or rehabilitates existing and/or historic structures
Foster a unique neighbourhood identity	The project creates or enhances community spaces such as public plazas, squares, parks, etc.
	The project markets uniqueness of the site with signage and area specific street lights and benches

This framework has been applied to three greyfield redevelopment sites in the GTA: Bronte Village Mall in Oakville, Ontario; Honeydale Mall in Toronto, Ontario; and Don Mills Shopping Centre in Toronto, Ontario. The purpose of the evaluation is to highlight the major strengths and weaknesses of the greyfield projects in order to validate existing literature, as well as to identify key areas of improvement for planners working in the GTA. The findings show that greyfield redevelopment has performed quite well on the whole. However, certain criteria were consistently lacking in the redevelopment proposals. These categories include: providing a range of housing type and affordability, defining a unique sense of place, and promoting environmental integrity through green building techniques.

Based on these three weak areas, recommendations to help improve greyfield redevelopment in the GTA are made. These recommendations are intended to be used by planners in the GTA, but developers and other stakeholders should also be involved. Recommendations 1 thru 6 are more so meant for Toronto planners in that they are to use the strategies listed below to help further their smart growth agenda. For instance, by simply creating a catalogue of all greyfield

sites in the GTA, planners can then be better prepared to enforce more smart growth elements as developers submit redevelopment applications. By applying these strategies to the existing planning process, a greater level of sustainability can be achieved. The final recommendation is also meant for planners in the GTA; however, it is important to realize that partnerships should be formed between the provincial government, developers, and other green agencies/organizations to help facilitate the learning of green building techniques which will improve future redevelopments. The recommendations are as follows:

Recommendation 1: Create a listing of existing greyfield sites and vulnerable mall sites in the GTA, so that planners can be prepared for new development proposals. By highlighting the key sites where planning research should be focused, and by understanding the potential for these sites, planners can then guide future redevelopment projects towards the best possible outcome.

Recommendation 2: Develop a monitoring and evaluation program for new development projects in the GTA so that opportunities for more socially, economically, and environmentally responsible development are not lost. Past projects should also be monitored so that any missing smart growth elements can be incorporated as new development opportunities present themselves.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen current housing affordability policies by not allowing developers to pay cash-in-lieu of affordable housing. This will make sure that there is a mix of unit affordability in each project and that the project's affordable units are not moved to other developments.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that the redevelopment projects are promoted and marketed as unique places to live and visit through the help of design measures incorporated by the developer. To encourage developers to promote a unique sense of place, stricter site plan

approval requirements should be introduced to ensure elements, such as community banners, or area-specific street lights and furniture, are included in the redevelopment plans. This could also be accomplished by strengthening the role of Toronto's Design Review Panel and ensuring that there is a more direct relationship between panel members and community planners.

Recommendation 5: Encourage a higher level of involvement from the existing community through the use of community outreach programs. This involvement will help to obtain valuable insight into the character of the existing neighbourhood, as well as identify the most urgent community needs. New development projects can then incorporate the most appropriate uses into the designs and have more insight into the uniqueness of the area. Additionally, encouraging greater public participation may also reduce instances of NIMBY-ism, which may help developers achieve greater densities and affordable housing if there is less opposition to the project.

Recommendation 6: Create a "source book" of local entrepreneurs, businesses, and educators that specialize in green building. This will provide a quick go-to source for all individuals involved in the development of new projects and will identify local strategies for green building.

Recommendation 7: Promote smart growth and "green" education programs for city planners, developers, stakeholders, and others, so that environmentally responsible approaches to redevelopment are known and understood.