

The Effect of Provincial and Municipal Sustainability Policies on Urban Development Patterns in Markham Ontario

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Executive Summary

THE ISSUE

Over the past decade in Ontario, the provincial government has taken a proactive approach to manage urban sprawl by developing and updating a number of policies aimed at encouraging more sustainable forms of development. Specifically, the Province has developed The Greenbelt Plan (2005), Places to Grow Plan (2006), and updated the Ontario Planning Act (2004) and the Ontario Provincial Policy statement (2005 and 2013). More recently, municipalities are starting to implement their own sustainability policies outside of what is mandated by the Province. One approach to sustainability that is gaining traction is the use of integrated community sustainability plans (ICSPs). ICSPs are a departure from traditional sustainability planning, because they take a comprehensive approach to sustainability that places responsibility for sustainability planning not with one department in a municipality, but with every department in a municipality as well as with the general public.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the multiplicity of policies that have been used to address the problem of urban sprawl in Ontario, this research report sought to answer the following question:

How have sustainability policies enacted at the provincial (Greenbelt Plan [2005], Places to Grow Plan [2006]) and municipal (Integrated Community Sustainability Plans) levels influenced development patterns and urban sprawl in a rapidly growing municipality of Ontario?

Using the City of Markham as a case study, this report focused on four indicators chosen from the literature on urban sprawl: changes to density, changes to intensification, type of housing units built, and growth area expansion. Markham was chosen because it has an established ICSP and all of the provincial sustainability plans described above apply to it.

METHODS

This research employed a case study methodology to examine the influence of sustainability policies on development patterns and urban sprawl in Markham. The selected indicators of urban sprawl were evaluated to ascertain whether urban sprawl has increased, decreased, or stayed the

same in Markham over the last decade. Policy reviews, document reviews, and semi-structured interviews supplied the necessary data to evaluate the selected indicators of urban sprawl.

RESULTS

Density- Density levels in Markham have increased significantly over the last decade with York Region requiring that new developments in Markham achieve the target of 70 people and jobs or 20 units per hectare; these density targets are driven by the Provincial Growth Plan. As a result, density targets are also now included in the Markham OP, where they did not used to exist prior to 2013.

Intensification- In its 2013 Official Plan, the City of Markham adopted an intensification target of 60%, meaning that 60% of new development in Markham should take place within already developed areas. This intensification target is beyond the 46% that was recorded in Markham between 1991 and 2001.

Mix of Housing Types- The mix of housing types in Markham has shifted considerably over the last decade away from predominantly low-density housing types, towards a greater number of housing types are high-density apartment buildings and row houses. Only 32% of new construction was high-density in 2004, however by 2014, the percentage of new construction that was high-density was over 62%.

Growth Area Expansion- Over the last decade, Markham has increased its growth boundary once. The boundary was expanded to accommodate the high rate of population growth occurring in Markham. The city limited the expansion to 900 hectares, which was below the 1000 hectares recommended by York Region.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the provincial Growth Plan appeared to have the greatest impact on development patterns in Markham over the last decade, owing to its specific intensification and density targets that must be met. The Greenbelt Plan, and updates to the Planning Act and the Provincial Policy Statement, have not had as big an influence on development patterns because they do not directly require changes to development patterns, but rather provide broad guidelines to guide development. Markham's Greenprint has had much less influence on development patterns, for

several reasons: the ICSP has only recently been adopted compared to the other plans; it serves primarily as a visionary document for sustainability goals in the municipality; and unlike the provincial plans, the municipality is not required to follow the ICSP.

As a result of these findings the following recommendations are made to other provinces and municipalities in Canada that are trying to implement strategies to limit urban sprawl:

1. Implement specific density and intensification targets that are legally binding.
2. Focus policies on directing growth to specific areas and not simply restricting where growth can happen
3. Develop a strategy to implement the targets that is jointly agreed to by city council and staff
4. Give developers time and support to transition to undertaking high-density developments
5. Build public support for higher density development through engagement and dialogue, and by gradually phasing in targets over time