

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Growth management is a subject that has gained increasing importance with the recent instatement of numerous provincial policies aimed at containing growth and mandating its future formation in a manner that is efficient and resourceful. Unfortunately, the process by which this is implemented has wrought much conflict in the subject area. Simcoe County is the province's third largest region, and because of its situation just north of the Greenbelt for the Greater Toronto Area, has become one of the most targeted areas for future urban development. Due to its inclusion within the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), the county has had the unfortunate experience of attempting to mandate very stringent development restrictions, as per the Places to Grow Plan (PTGP) for the GGH (to which it is included), despite being subject to "leapfrog development" resulting from the instatement of the sister initiative to this plan – the Greenbelt Act. The county has actually yielded a growth rate twice as high as the provincial average, and is home to some of the fastest growing communities in Canada. Keeping in tune with this pace, the province has allocated a total of 667, 000 in population growth to the county, with 180,000 and 41,000 respectively being designated specifically to the separated cities of Barrie and Orillia. This has left 40,000 in unallocated growth, the dispersion of which has become a major source of contention.

The new Provincial Policy Statement (2005) has assigned specific responsibilities to upper-tier levels of government that pertain to growth management. The formation of a growth management plan is one aspect of the Official Plan review, and is carried out in conjunction with the completion of the Transportation Master Plan and Natural Heritage System Update. Nearly all concerns involving growth-management are cross-border in nature, and therefore demand coordination on planning matters between local governments that previously may not have occurred. Simcoe County is disadvantaged in the sense that the separated cities of Barrie and Orillia are included in the geographical purview of the county, yet are separate politically and administratively. This misfortune is further compounded by a geographical split between the north and south portions of the county. Lastly, the upper-tier level of government is *not* responsible for the provision of water and wastewater services, which play a major role in this allocation of population distributions. No doubt, Simcoe County has been faced with a very difficult undertaking in the drafting of and implementation of a formalized growth plan, given these awkward circumstances.

In obvious anticipation of the task ahead, the province, in partnership with the county, sixteen member municipalities, the separated cities of Barrie and Orillia, and other parties with a vested interest in growth management, have undertaken extensive technical research and analysis by way of the Inter-Governmental Action Plan (IGAP). The goal of this undertaking was to determine how to best address common concerns over growth management in a cost-effective and timely manner, and provide affected municipalities with proper tools to assist them in their planning and development decision-making. More specifically, the Growth Potentials Assessment Report utilized the breadth of technical analysis completed (i.e. the Assimilative Capacity Studies), in order to effectively evaluate four very realistic growth scenarios for the region. This was done using a trusted framework which effectively summarizes the majority of provincial policy objectives for the achievement of efficient urban form.

Building on the momentum generated from the IGAP, the county underwent further specialized growth management studies, from which a series of technical reports and documents were produced. This ultimately culminated in the completion of the Draft Simcoe Area Growth Plan. The overall intent of the plan is that, in keeping with market demand, the majority of projected population and employment growth should be dispersed among three designated “enterprise zones” along the Highway 400 corridor in Innisfil, Bradford West Gwillimbury, and in the community of Alliston, with supplementary residential growth also being designated to several other primarily rural townships. The plan purposely avoids *substantially* recognizing or supporting any existing urban centers, namely Midland, Penetanguishene, Collingwood, and Barrie.

Not surprisingly, the plan generated fervent criticism from the City of Barrie (among others), as provincial objectives such as urban intensification and the preservation of resources do not seem to be prioritized. The county is being accused of facilitating automobile-dependent development that does not make best use of existing infrastructure. Given the fact that Barrie has been designated by the province as the only urban growth centre north of the greenbelt, it requires a substantial proportion of the population to be concentrated within the city in order to fulfil this mandate. Throughout months of debate, two very distinct approaches to growth management have emerged, each claiming to prioritize efficient urban form.

Given that the purpose of the IGAP was to inform growth strategy in Simcoe County, the framework used in the Growth Potentials Assessment Report has been utilized in order to determine which approach to growth management is most appropriate in light of provincial objectives. A series of refined questions and accompanying criteria that could be used to evaluate particular growth options are categorized into the following six benchmarks: (1) Building strong communities; (2) Wise use and management of resources; (3) Protecting public health and safety; (4) Implementation assessment; (5) Financial viability; and (6) Community response.

Analysis has indicated that while Simcoe County may have been advocating for a “community of communities” model, it has not been attempted in its purest form. Anticipated population growth far exceeds provincial projections; densities fall far below stated minimum requirements; and the instatement of mass amounts of employment lands and residential development do not automatically constitute the creation of complete communities. Intensification is perhaps the strongest provincial objective, yet settlement boundaries have not been respected (despite claims otherwise); existing infrastructure will not have been utilized in an effective manner; and development does not significantly diverge from the automobile-dependent style of development so typical of the last quarter-century. Preservation of self-sufficient small towns is often cited as justification for the continuation of traditional forms of growth that have long defined the area, yet ultimately contributed to unnecessary sprawl.

Simcoe County appears to have no regard for matters of provincial interest, namely the preservation of ecological systems and natural resources. Little regard appears to have been made for the Assimilative Capacity Studies carried out expressly for the purpose of informing the plan, and mass development is scheduled for areas expressly restricted because of their natural resources. While costs that account for growth are astronomically high for both parties,

Simcoe County is likely to find itself in dire straits, as no real plan for financing appears to exist beyond the collection of development charges on residential development by member municipalities. Unfortunately, the province is unlikely to fund infrastructure that facilitates growth in complete contradiction to the PTGP for the GGH, and to which nearly one quarter of member municipalities currently object.

Barrie has pointed to the fact that urban-type forms in small rural communities may actually work to undermine provincial objectives for the county as a whole, by reducing residential and employment-related development that would otherwise occur in existing urban areas suitable for intensification. Barrie is the only major city showing all the signs of a “complete community” in terms of the provision of services (both hard and soft), that is also capable of facilitating the majority of provincial population projections by means of intensification. Due to lack of viable employment lands, it is also *incapable* of accommodating substantial amounts of population growth, as a certain proportion of “employment” designation must include jobs situated on actual “employment lands.”

Debate has logically shifted to the annexation of what have come to be known as the “moratorium lands” south of Barrie, which could be serviced by the city in exchange for the land itself. This would indirectly legitimize increased forms of primarily residential intensification in the UGC and other nodes, which ultimately makes more efficient use of existing services and facilitates the preservation of valuable resources through urban containment. Innisfil has outright denied the possibility of this occurring, however, and has become vehement in its criticism of Barrie for suggesting this as an option.

Unfortunately, annexation of these lands is unlikely to occur without higher-level intervention, beyond delaying the approval of the Simcoe Area Growth Plan. Provincial reforms have enabled municipalities tremendously, yet the exercise of this autonomy must be facilitated within a provincial policy framework that demands compliance to it. If not, the “sprawl” that has come to define much of the GGH south of the greenbelt will simply occur north of it as well.