

Executive Summary



The Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) is one of the fastest growing regions in North America. In recent decades, it has experienced tremendous pressure from population growth and the urban and suburban development that accompanies it.

The Province has put in place legislation and plans to accommodate growth while protecting valuable farmland, water resources and natural heritage. In 1985, it established the Niagara Escarpment Plan (revised in 1994 and 2005), followed by the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan in 2002. The Province then embarked on a landmark initiative for the region, creating the Greenbelt Plan in 2005, followed by the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe in 2006. These four plans provide a framework to accommodate population and employment growth in a more sustainable manner while protecting vital assets such as high-quality farmland, water resources and natural areas. In the last decade, the plans' policies have begun to reduce urban sprawl, encourage the development of more complete communities, and provide increased focus on the region's agricultural resources and natural heritage.

The Province is undertaking a simultaneous review of all four plans, recognizing their common geography and the interconnected nature of their policies. This Coordinated Review of the four plans provides an opportunity to assess progress to date, address challenges and make improvements to strengthen the plans and ensure a vibrant, healthy region for current and future generations.

The Government created an Advisory Panel to provide recommendations that would inform this review. Our role is to develop consensus-based recommendations to the Ministers of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and Natural Resources and Forestry on ways to amend and improve the plans. Our analysis and the recommendations contained in this report are based on careful consideration of the advice provided during 17 Town Hall Meetings held across the GGH; submissions and briefings by the public, stakeholders and municipalities; site visits to places of interest in the region; and background papers prepared by staff of the Ministries of Municipal

Urban Structure of the Greater Golden Horseshoe



Affairs and Housing, and Natural Resources and Forestry, in collaboration with partner ministries (Ministries of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Environment and Climate Change, and Transportation). The Province will seek further input on any subsequent amendments to the four plans.

The Greater Golden Horseshoe – a Region Under Pressure

The GGH is blessed with abundant fresh water, significant natural features, excellent farmland and a moderate climate. These assets support a high quality of life and diverse economic opportunities for the residents of the region, which in turn continue to attract ongoing population growth. The GGH has seen rapid rates of growth since the end of World War II, especially since the 1990s when the population

began to grow by 100,000 to 120,000 people every year. The extent of settlement has also grown. For example, between 1971 and 2006, the region's urban footprint more than doubled. Much of the recent urban growth has been in the form of low-density, car-dependent suburbs, providing many residents with affordable, single-detached homes. However, this form of development, often known as urban sprawl, has resulted in loss of farmland, traffic congestion, deteriorating air and water quality, impacts on human health, and the loss of green space, habitats and biodiversity. The changing climate and increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events create additional pressures on the region's communities, agricultural production, infrastructure and natural systems.

The Province has forecast that the number of people living in the GGH will grow from the current population of about nine million people to about 13.5 million by 2041, with the number of jobs forecast to rise from 4.5 million to 6.3 million. This will increase our population by nearly 50 per cent and the number of jobs by 40 per cent. A central question for the region is "where and how will future growth be accommodated?" This question was a major imperative for the creation of the Growth Plan and Greenbelt plans. At the heart of the Growth Plan is the allocation of growth forecasts to GGH municipalities to help them assess the amount of land required to accommodate new development. As of 2013, approximately 107,000 hectares were available as "designated greenfield areas" to accommodate forecast growth to 2031, the first time horizon of the Growth Plan. Amendment 2 to the Growth Plan provided additional forecasts for the GGH to accommodate two million more people by 2041, and some municipalities are now working on analysis to assess land needs to accommodate this additional growth.

Ultimately, the amount of land needed to accommodate expected growth to 2041 will depend on the rate of intensification (infill in existing urban areas) and the density of new development in each municipality. Fortunately, land consumption rates are decreasing, reflecting a trend towards building more compact communities. For example, between 1991 and 2001, the population of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) grew by 19 per cent, while the urban area expanded by

26 per cent. Between 2001 and 2011, the population of the GTHA grew by 18 per cent, but the urban area expanded by only 10 per cent. If the trend for decreasing land consumption continues, it is likely that much of the land that has been designated to accommodate forecasted growth by 2031 will not actually be developed by that date, providing flexibility to accommodate some or all of the expected needs to meet 2041 forecasts within existing designated greenfield areas.

The Greenbelt contains almost 800,000 hectares (two million acres) of protected land, including the Niagara Escarpment, Oak Ridges Moraine and the land known as “Protected Countryside” that lies at the centre of the GGH. The Greenbelt protects important ecological and hydrological systems, as well as an agricultural system composed of prime agricultural lands, rural areas and specialty crop areas. In addition, the three Greenbelt plans are an essential component of the provincial strategy to contain urban sprawl. There is evidence to show that they are important tools to contribute to protection of natural and agricultural assets, and control of urban expansion. However, they need to be strengthened to fully reach their objectives. We also heard concerns that speculative investments pose a risk of “leapfrog” development in areas beyond the Greenbelt, such as Simcoe and Brant Counties.

Towards a Better Future

The four plans are designed to address the challenges associated with growth and development, and we fully support their goals and objectives. This review provides a timely opportunity to pause, reflect and adjust these land use policies to shape future growth more effectively. With the benefit of past experience with plan implementation and input from stakeholders, the general public and experts in many disciplines, we have identified six strategic directions and provided 87 recommendations that build on the existing goals and objectives of the four plans in order to fully realize their potential to contribute to greater economic prosperity, more efficient transportation, more productive agriculture, healthier communities and more resilient natural systems.

Our strategic directions encompass many inter-related ideas that work together to achieve the objectives of the four plans. For example, we must curb sprawl and build more compact communities in order to

support transit, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect valuable farmland. Protection of farmland alone is not enough unless it is also productive and supports a strong agricultural economy. Our sense of place in this beautiful part of the Great Lakes Basin relies on the care we invest in our natural and cultural heritage. Natural features and functions, including water resources and biodiversity, are essential to support healthy, prosperous communities that are resilient to climate change. Many forms of infrastructure – from water supply, stormwater and wastewater to transit, cycling, walking and roads – provide an essential foundation for human health and economic activities. Drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions are essential to reduce our contribution to climate change. Decreased vehicle emissions will also pay huge dividends in improved air quality throughout the region. Finally, implementing the four plans more effectively and efficiently depends on a more collaborative and coordinated effort involving different levels of government, civil society and the private sector.

Building Complete Communities

During the consultation phase of this review, it was clear that there is widespread support for the overall intent of the four plans – to use land more efficiently, create livable communities, reduce commute times, protect valued resources and support a strong and competitive economy. We heard that people value a diverse mix of land uses and housing types, a range of employment opportunities, high-quality public open space, a variety of transportation choices, and easy access to stores and services. We call these places “complete communities”.

Existing urban settlements in the GGH range from historic villages to downtown centres and low-density suburbs. There are many opportunities within these areas for rejuvenation to create more complete communities with vibrant mixed uses, transit-supportive densities and infrastructure for walking and cycling. New developments in greenfield areas can also be designed as complete communities that provide jobs, housing, transit and recreation opportunities, while supporting individual and community health. Infrastructure costs are lower for compact communities. They can also help to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and energy use, thereby working towards becoming a net-zero or low-carbon community.

Our recommendations on building complete communities focus on strengthening the plans by:

- Directing more new development to existing urban areas through intensification, and less to new greenfield areas
- Increasing the density of housing and job opportunities in new development to create well-designed, healthy and transit-supportive communities
- Establishing stronger criteria to control settlement area expansion
- Encouraging a greater mix of housing types, including affordable housing
- Protecting employment areas and supporting evolving economic activities

Supporting Agriculture

The GGH has high-quality soils and climatic conditions that make it ideally suited for a wide range of crops and livestock, including the specialty crop areas in Niagara Region and Holland Marsh. These same qualities have also made this region a highly desirable place to live, from the original Aboriginal land users to the early settlers from Europe and the more recent immigrants from around the world. Agriculture today is a major contributor to Ontario's economy, identity and way of life.

During the consultations for this review, many associations and individuals in the farming sector emphasized that farmland is a finite resource and the planning regime in the GGH needs strengthening to stem the ongoing loss of agricultural land to other land uses. We also heard concerns about threats to the viability of agriculture from speculative land investments, land use conflicts in near-urban areas, complex regulations and deficiencies in rural infrastructure.

Recognizing the fundamental importance of agriculture in the GGH, our recommendations focus on:

- Promoting the identification, mapping and protection of an agricultural system throughout the region
- Implementing stronger criteria to limit the loss and fragmentation of prime agricultural lands, particularly in the outer-ring municipalities beyond the Greenbelt

- Supporting productive agriculture
- Recognizing the importance of locally sourced food and urban agriculture
- Integrating the needs of agriculture throughout the plans, for example when considering settlement area expansion, the rural economy, management of natural resources, infrastructure development, climate change and plan implementation
- Applying an agriculture lens to other provincial policies and programs (such as climate change, transportation and infrastructure, financial tools, community improvement plans and education) to address the unique needs of agriculture in the GGH

Protecting Natural and Cultural Heritage

The GGH is defined by the Great Lakes and the rivers that flow into them, combined with the rolling landscapes of the Oak Ridges Moraine and the dramatic cliffs of the Niagara Escarpment. The natural systems in the region provide a range of ecosystem services that support human life, biodiversity and economic activities. During the consultations, we heard that many groups and individuals are concerned about ongoing environmental degradation in the region and its effects on our health, as well as on the sustainability of natural systems and wildlife.

Aggregates contained in geological formations represent another natural resource that is essential for continued growth and development. We heard during the consultations that we need to find a better balance between supplying essential aggregate materials for buildings and infrastructure, while minimizing the immediate and long-term cumulative effects of extraction and transportation on natural systems, agriculture and rural communities.

Cultural heritage embodies, protects and sustains our sense of identity and meaning and helps to make communities vital and special places. Heritage resources provide important visual landmarks, enhance community appeal and convey a sense of place. They also create opportunities for recreation and tourism, and help attract investment based on cultural amenities. In many communities in the GGH, built heritage, cultural heritage landscapes and archeological resources are under pressure from development and site alteration.

Our recommendations to improve protection and management of natural and cultural heritage focus on:

- Requiring integrated watershed and sub-watershed planning as a prerequisite for settlement area expansion, and major new developments and infrastructure projects
- Improving the mapping, identification, protection and enhancement of natural heritage systems throughout the region
- Growing the Greenbelt by adding areas of critical hydrological significance, such as headwaters of major rivers, moraines, groundwater recharge areas, important surface water features and urban river valleys
- Improving the management of excess soil from development sites
- Developing a long-term strategy for ensuring the wise use, conservation, availability and management of aggregate resources
- Strengthening the protection of cultural heritage

Providing Infrastructure

Daily life in the GGH depends on a wide range of infrastructure –ranging from roads and transit to communications, water supply, wastewater treatment, stormwater management, and energy generation and transmission. Much of our existing infrastructure is aging and requires maintenance and upgrading. The pace of growth in the region requires massive investments in infrastructure to support new homes, businesses and transportation requirements. Meanwhile, the changing climate is bringing about increases in extreme weather events and forcing us to re-think many existing standards and expectations for infrastructure design and management.

During the consultations, we heard from many stakeholders and individuals that traffic gridlock is one of the greatest issues affecting individual health and wellbeing, business efficiency and economic competitiveness. People told us that water and sewer services need to be provided more efficiently, and that inadequate stormwater management is affecting groundwater resources, water quality, flooding and erosion. Stakeholders also emphasized that green infrastructure is just as important as the more traditional forms of built infrastructure and encouraged us to integrate the use of multi-functional green systems throughout urban and rural areas.

Our recommendations focus on upgrading existing infrastructure, meeting the demands of growth, increasing resilience to climate change, and keeping the region's economy strong and globally competitive by:

- Requiring greater integration of infrastructure planning with land use planning
- Designating and protecting corridors for provincial and municipal infrastructure
- Requiring upper- and single-tier municipalities to undertake climate change vulnerability risk assessments to guide the design of resilient infrastructure
- Providing policy direction to support green infrastructure
- Improving coordination among the Growth Plan, the Province's Multi-modal Transportation Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, and Metrolinx's regional transportation plan, The Big Move
- Identifying strategic areas within the region's planned and existing transit network for focused intensification
- Increasing focused investment in transit initiatives to support complete communities
- Increasing efforts on transportation demand management, active transportation and transit integration

Mainstreaming Climate Change

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing the GGH, and the Province as a whole. By 2050, we can expect an increase in average summer temperatures ranging from 2.5 to 3.5 degrees Celsius in southern Ontario and 1 to 4.5 degrees Celsius in Northern Ontario, depending on location. The projected change in winter temperatures is even more dramatic, increasing by 3 to 6 degrees Celsius in southern Ontario and 6 to 10 degrees Celsius in Northern Ontario, depending upon location. This will have significant impacts on our environment, economy, health and quality of life.

We heard from stakeholders and the public that climate change mitigation and adaptation must be explicitly addressed in the four plans in order to reduce Ontario's greenhouse gas emissions while also preparing to manage the risks of a changing climate to our health, safety, economy,

ecosystems and infrastructure. We view climate change as a critical driver for many of the policies in the four plans, one that needs to be brought into the mainstream of all our planning and development activities.

Our recommendations demonstrate how we can mainstream climate change throughout the four plans by:

- Applying more aggressive intensification and density targets to achieve compact, low-carbon communities
- Improving alignment of transportation planning and investment with growth forecasting and allocation
- Accelerating progress to improve and extend transit and active transportation infrastructure
- Promoting stronger protection and enhancement of natural systems and agricultural lands
- Directing upper- and single-tier municipalities to prepare climate change plans or incorporate policies into official plans to advance climate change mitigation and adaptation goals

Implementing the Plans

Although the four plans share many goals and intentions, there is no question that having multiple plans with overlapping geographies and diverse implementation mechanisms has created challenges for landowners, developers, municipalities, provincial ministries, and many other organizations and stakeholders. During the consultations we heard concerns that terminology and policies in the plans are inconsistent and sometimes conflicting. Municipalities emphasized the need for more technical and financial support to comply with the requirements of the plans. We heard concerns about the amount of time and expense involved in Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) hearings, and some of the procedures of the Niagara Escarpment Commission. Many environmental groups and some municipalities called for expansions of the Greenbelt while some landowners and other stakeholders raised concerns about Greenbelt boundaries and designations.

Our recommendations to improve implementation of the plans include:

- Addressing designation and boundary concerns associated with the existing plans by applying policy changes

recommended in this report related to such matters as:
settlement area expansion; complete communities; strategic
employment lands; infrastructure and servicing; agricultural
viability; protection of farmland; natural heritage systems; water
resources; climate change; and enhancing plan implementation

- Increasing efficiency and reducing duplication of approval processes for the Niagara Escarpment Plan area
- Streamlining the policy framework, terminology and timelines of the four plans
- Extending the timeframe for municipalities to conform with Growth Plan Amendment 2 to 2021
- Developing a comprehensive monitoring program
- Ensuring there is a secretariat within the provincial government with the capacity and resources to ensure effective coordination of actions by provincial ministries, the Niagara Escarpment Commission, municipalities, conservation authorities, and other local bodies that will facilitate implementation of the four plans and address the recommendations in this report
- Creating an oversight forum to monitor and report on implementation and deliver public education about the four plans

Towards Timely Action

This review is a snapshot in time. We recognize that ten years is a relatively short period to measure the effects of land use planning initiatives, but some clear trends and needs are already emerging. We have concluded that there are signs of progress towards more effective growth management, and there is support for agriculture and environmental protection in the GGH, but there are also signs that the current policy framework needs to be strengthened in order to ensure that the vision and goals of the plan are fully achieved. We heard a sense of urgency from the many stakeholder submissions and participants in the Town Hall Meetings and agree that we must seize this opportunity to strengthen the framework, address the mistakes of the past and create a better future for the region.

We recognize that our recommendations will be implemented over varying timeframes. For example, some policy amendments can be made relatively quickly during the time period of this review, whereas it may take several years to develop guidance material, prepare new maps or undertake environmental monitoring to support new or amended policies. The Ministries have stated that they hope to conclude the Coordinated Review and have amended plans in place by summer 2016. We support that aggressive timeline and believe that many of our recommendations can and should be implemented through the amendment process. We emphasize that it will be important to ensure that work needed to inform conformity with the Growth Plan is available when needed by municipalities. Finally, it may take longer to implement other recommendations, but we stress that it is essential to act on them as quickly as possible (within five years) in order to achieve a better future for the region in a comprehensive, efficient and effective manner.

In Conclusion

We sincerely hope that the Province will act on our recommendations in a comprehensive and timely fashion. Our deliberations during this review, combined with the input from many stakeholders and members of the public, revealed an urgent need to strengthen the four plans and to support them with a wide range of complementary actions. The plans provide a strong foundation but we must step up our efforts to curb sprawl, build complete communities, grow the Greenbelt, support agriculture and address traffic congestion. We owe it to current and future generations to ensure that the GGH supports healthy lifestyles, a high quality of life, a sustainable environment and a prosperous economy.