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Media Release:

Minister Bypasses Regional Governments With Secret Process for Local Mayors to Unilaterally Change Official Plans

New process requires no Council input and no public consultation to once again force urban boundary expansions



Local Citizens protest Forced Boundary Expansions on University Avenue West in Waterloo on July 29th, 2023

Photo Credit: Kevin Thomason

Waterloo – Community groups celebrated recently when the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Paul Calandra, made the unexpected announcement that he would reverse his predecessor's decision to force the expansion of Waterloo Region's Countryside Line and similar urban boundaries in municipalities across Ontario. **The celebration was short-lived, as a secret letter (<https://bit.ly/MMAHLetter>) from Minister Calandra to local mayors was leaked on Thursday and contained a new undemocratic process that will allow individual lower-tier mayors to unilaterally decide to maintain some or all of the former forced boundary expansions.**

The astounding move by Minister Calandra intentionally bypasses the authority of the Region of Waterloo and other upper-tier governments with the responsibility to coordinate land use and infrastructure planning across area municipalities. City and township mayors in Waterloo Region now each have 35 days to identify the changes they would like to see in the Region of Waterloo's Official Plan, including changes to the Countryside Lines and urban growth boundaries. The Minister's letter specifically states that mayors are not required to seek the approval of their elected Council. The new process has placed mayors under immense lobbying pressure from land speculators and developers

who stand to earn hundreds of millions of dollars in windfall profits if the forced boundary expansions are approved.

In August of 2022, Waterloo Regional Council approved the Regional Official Plan, with all city and township mayors voting in favour of its approval. The plan was created following four years of extensive consultations and public engagement. Staff and technical experts undertook detailed studies to ensure that each municipality had enough land to exceed future housing needs. It is not possible to re-create such comprehensive engagement and expert input within the 35 days allocated to area mayors by the Minister, and the closed-door structure of the process does not require it.

In the Minister's statement that announced the surprise reversal of the forced boundary expansions just two weeks ago, the Minister said that his predecessor's decision failed to meet the test of supporting the Province's goal of building at least 1.5 million homes in a manner that maintains and reinforces public trust. This new secret and undemocratic process also does not meet that standard, and comes amid widespread concerns that the process for selecting specific parcels for inclusion in the urban boundaries was politically motivated. These land-use decisions by the provincial government are currently the subject of ongoing investigations by the RCMP, Auditor General, and Integrity Commissioner.

Citizens and elected officials expressed concerns when the Province announced new strong mayor powers that allow city mayors to veto decisions of council and approve decisions with only a minority in favour. However, the strong mayor powers at least require a public process, public engagement, and also allow a super-majority of councillors the opportunity to overrule the mayor. This newest process has none of those checks and safeguards. Further, any official plan amendments made on behalf of a mayor cannot be appealed.

Local mayors have publicly rejected the need for strong mayor powers. In an [August 17, 2022 interview with CBC News](#), Kitchener's Mayor Vrbancovic stated that, "in all of my 28 years on council, I have not seen an instance where strong mayor powers would have been necessary in our community." In a [June 16, 2023 interview with the Waterloo Record](#), Waterloo's Mayor McCabe echoed this sentiment saying that she "cannot foresee a situation where I would see a need to use those powers."

"We already have the visionary, sustainable Regional Official Plan that we need with enough lands already designated through fair and proper planning processes to far surpass our housing targets" states Kevin Thomason, Vice-Chair of the Grand River Environmental Network. "Data and analysis shows that land is not the issue with our housing crisis. We don't need more secret backroom deals for developers who are well-connected to Doug Ford's provincial government and continually try to bypass all proper planning processes, staff, professionals, other levels of government, and public engagement."

"We are only 3.5 years from the next mandatory review of our Official Plan which will allow for updates and any needed changes to be made—it's important this is done through proper and transparent planning processes with meaningful public engagement, including consultation with First Nations," states Alex Szaflarska from Hold the Line Waterloo Region. "We were heartened to hear that the Minister was reversing the forced expansions, and we hoped that this would restore the integrity of our Countryside Line. In light of the newest announcement, we call on our local mayors to listen to the community, and to tell the Minister to finally approve the August 2022 Regional Official Plan."

“We are already losing more than 319 acres of farmland per day in Ontario” says Mark Reusser, Vice-President of the Waterloo Federation of Agriculture, “I find it difficult to believe that the Minister would contemplate bypassing Waterloo’s exemplary Regional government that has planning authority, which has so skillfully co-ordinated our complex Regional Official Plan process, and instead grant lower-tier mayors requests for land with no collaboration, no professional planning, no idea of financial implications, nor any of the normally required studies and consultation with even their own councils. This appears to be a recipe for chaos and likely the loss of thousands of more acres of irreplaceable farmland.”

Others around the province are raising concerns as well including the advocacy group Environmental Defence which issued a [press release](#) late on Friday that frankly and clearly outlines their concerns. [Freedom of information requests led by Ecojustice](#), Canada’s largest environmental law charity, have revealed documents showing that it was partisan staff in the Minister’s Office and not civil servant experts who directed changes to municipal official plans. To date, the Province has only provided Ecojustice with a portion of the documents that the Information and Privacy Commissioner has ordered released.

Citizens are urged to contact their local council, mayor, and regional council to ensure that our official plans are approved intact, that strong mayor powers are not used to bypass council and the Region, and that mayors do not seek devastating forced boundary expansions that would only enable well-connected developers to profit by circumventing proper planning processes that have already positioned our communities to exceed provincial housing targets while growing sustainably.



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The Grand River Environmental Network (www.gren.ca) is a grassroots community group that is a proactive voice for the environment in the Grand River Watershed.

Hold The Line Waterloo Region (www.holdthelinewr.org) is an organization focussed on the visionary Countryside Line and sustainable development in Waterloo Region.

The Waterloo Federation of Agriculture (<https://ofa.on.ca/federations/waterloo/>) is the local federation of the Ontario Federation Agriculture (OFA) advocating for farm families and agriculture in the Region of Waterloo.

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