**Presentation to the Region of Waterloo Committee of the Whole, November 9, 2021**

**Re: Regional Official Plan Review Update – Recommended Preferred Growth Scenario for the Land Needs Assessment Process**

Presented by Greg Michalenko

On behalf of the Grand River Environmental Network (GRE

**Our Concerns**

The Region of Waterloo is proposing, from a limited list of three possible options, a “preferred growth scenario” that would “result in the need for a preliminary urban boundary expansion of approximately 1,028 hectares of land (230 hectares for community area growth, and 800 hectares for employment area growth)”. This is to fulfill a Government of Ontario directive to identify land needs to satisfy projected urban growth by 2051.

This would result in the loss of a considerable amount of rural land, including both agricultural and natural areas. We question whether so much is really needed.

**The Planning Time Frame should be reconsidered.**

We believe a 30-year planning frame is inappropriate at this time. We are entering an era of enormous uncertainty because of the climate crisis. Covid has also introduced massive changes to economic activity over less than two years, including its infrastructural needs. This is not a matter of economic transition but rather a profound, looming transformation. The economy is shifting and unpredictable. This is not the time to be making costly, irreversible bets on the year 2051. The planning time frame should be reduced to only 10 to 15 years as a precautionary interim measure.

It is also prudent to wait a bit as new climate change policies and programs arise from the COP deliberations, new Paris Treaty obligations for Canada, new Federal Canadian government commitments, and perhaps some Ontario initiatives. In addition, public consciousness of the climate crisis and concerns about its implications are now very high. The public accepts the need to do things differently, and is willing to help.

There have been precedents of misguided reliance on projections in Waterloo Region. The officially accepted high population growth rates used for planning a few decades ago forecast a water shortage for domestic use necessitating the expenditure of some $2 billion for a pipeline to Lake Erie. Fortunately, water conservation efforts were introduced and readily accepted by conscientious residents, eventually reducing per-capita water consumption by over 50%. Meanwhile, the actual population growth rate turned out to be considerably lower than the official projections. The expensive pipeline was unnecessary.

**There is a need for systematic, meaningful public consultation.**

There are usually significant benefits from well-designed public consultation. Here is a remarkable example:

• Some 20 years ago the Region announced plans for a new landfill. Studies resulted in 5 candidate sites based on a limited number of criteria. Public meetings were announced. I went to the consultation for the proposed site near New Hamburg. To their credit, Region planning staff organized the meeting very well with abundant, clear, and pertinent information, and opportunities for meaningful conversations with staff before the formal part of the meeting. The public, some 200-strong, were then invited to line up at microphones to offer their thoughts. Soon there was a message from a farm adjacent to the proposed site. The farmer revealed that his farm was actually a partner in a collaborative research project with Health Canada involving several million dollars of funding. They were perfecting procedures to eradicate salmonella infestations in turkey farming; the project would be ruined by gulls feasting in the decaying garbage next door and then pooping over the experimental birds. The site-selection studies had clearly been deficient.

Soon came an appeal that changed the course of the landfill proposal completely. A 14 year old boy took the microphone. He mentioned that he lived in Kitchener and the City was conducting an interesting small pilot project in his neighbourhood. It involved the provision of unusual ”blue boxes” for collecting recyclable waste. He described how well-accepted the program was and that all his neighbours were participating with great enthusiasm. He then asked why the Region was doing something so outdated as merely burying garbage in landfills instead of developing a comprehensive waste-management program. There was a stunned moment of silence and then thunderous applause, and speaker after speaker began asking the Region to take up the boy’s challenge. The Region responded quickly, withdrew its landfill plan, and announced that it was investigating alternatives. Our Region became a model for Canada with the very first municipal blue-box program, and land was spared for agriculture instead of garbage sequestration.

Good, meaningful public consultation is crucial in this case too. Please provide appropriate time and clear guidelines for individuals and community groups to provide their input. This is essential. Please give us a chance: we want to help the Region make wise decisions.

**We need a broader set of options to consider.**

The three options don’t give enough scope. They are all “landfills” and not innovative leading-edge proposals designed for a carbon-neutral future. We must get away from falling back on the convenience of annexing entire rural landscapes, rather than testing new approaches.

We ask you to reconsider and provide at least one option based on a new model of **no** annexation for community plans and a much different approach to assessing employment land needs.

**There is need to reconsider the present working models or formulas for determining employment land needs.**

On a work day last week we toured an established expansive employment district in the City of Waterloo. Here are some of the things we noticed:

• Parking areas for staff and visitors take up much of the land, but about 40% of the area had no vehicles on it.

• Some properties had large unused areas.

• Many loading areas appeared to be larger than necessary.

• Most facilities had office wings. They were almost all just one-storey.

• Some land was given over to lawns. Why is this necessary in warehouse and industrial production zones?

• There were wide strips of lawn on City easements along roads. These are not essential.

Clearly, if current employment area formulas are based on such configurations, there is ample scope for enhanced efficiencies and innovation in employment land design.

**Bring in some innovative experts and see what they can offer.**

Effectively embracing the reality of the low-carbon future means radically new approaches are necessary. Some planning experts and consultants, experienced with employment land strategies, are working with new visions. What can they offer?

**We must not capitulate to the power of land speculators and unimaginative developers.**

Much of the land surrounding the cities is owned by land speculators and developers. When the Region last revised its official plan, a consortium of over 20 large development companies and land speculators launched an elaborate OMB challenge. It was a very messy affair and cost the Region, according to some estimations, about $5 million in legal fees. The Region eventually decided to cut its losses and handed over another 400 hectares. Currently another OMB/LPAT challenge in the City of Waterloo will result in diverting staff and finances to 20 days of hearings with an estimated cost to the municipality of perhaps $800,000.

We ask you to make your decisions based on the needs and concerns of residents, and not the profit motives of speculators.