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A Sprawling Future for Simcoe County?

Ontario's Simcoe County is negotiating with the Ontario government to finalize a growth plan that will see 183,000 new residents and 58,000 new jobs in the county between 2011 and 2031 – increases of 38% and 30% respectively. While this growth is much smaller than that which will be experienced in the municipalities around Toronto, the way in which this growth will occur sets a trend in Simcoe for continued inefficient scattering of growth in a land-consumptive manner.

Via an amendment to the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), many of the townships in the county will have intensification* targets of 20% of all new residential units and greenfield growth density minimums of 32 persons per gross hectare – much lower than the 40% and 50 respectively set for other GGH municipalities. The reductions reflect desires by affected townships to maintain historical rural characteristics. It is unlikely that the minimums will be exceeded, but rather targeted as maximums.

The adequacy of agricultural land in Simcoe County is more than a ratio of Simcoe's acreages to Simcoe's population; it is a foodland reservoir for all of the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The need to preserve farmlands in Simcoe is as important as it is in, for example, York Region or Halton Region. It should be noted that Ontario has for many years been a net importer of food.

The foreseeable conditions of the 21st century – high transportation energy costs, climate instability, economic uncertainty, and a risk of food supply issues related to energy and climate – suggests that long term sustainability is best served if population and employment growth is accommodated compactly in ways that enable daily shops and services to be accessible by walking or a minimum in overall travel distances, thereby also sparing as much rural land as possible.

Depending on how the boundaries of built-up areas are set, it is possible that intensification that will occur in Simcoe's townships will be at low densities – rural character trumping land efficiency. For those situations, intensification targets can be set higher, and include not only residential units but, at least a share of employment opportunities.

The perception has existed among many that a detached home on an expansive lot is pretty well the only appropriate housing type in rural municipalities. This perception ignores the very diverse needs of people that now or in the future will inhabit those municipalities – people who have difficulty maintaining their properties due to age or infirmity, those of modest income (such as young people just entering working lives, or older low-paid workers), and people who would like more convenient lifestyles than large properties offer (such as single persons and couples without children). Simcoe County's Housing Needs Assessment Study (2007) recognized the imbalance in the housing supply.

Greenfield development, where unavoidable, can occur in ways that do not threaten existing neighbourhoods, and it certainly can happen in ways that are much less environmentally and economically wasteful than traditional development at 32, or even 50, persons per hectare.

SUDA has long said that 50 residents and jobs per hectare for greenfield development is unsustainably low, and that higher densities can be very pleasant places in which to live. Technically speaking, greenfield and intensification densities in excess of 50 persons per hectare are not difficult to design, and do not need to be dominated by apartment-style housing. Certainly rebalancing the housing supply to include smaller units (ownership or rental) enables higher densities in Simcoe's townships to be achieved.

An example of sustainable and livable communities is an adaptation of the pre-industrial European village and town model, where daily needs (schools, jobs) can be accessed by walking and where a wide variety of housing exists for a full spectrum of households. (An updated European town/village model for greenfield development would include, for example, more public greenspaces and open areas, backyards for homes, better transportation infrastructure, and modern water and wastewater treatment systems.)

Rather than spreading population growth throughout a township or throughout Simcoe County, the portion of growth that is assigned for greenfield lands could instead be consolidated in whole or in part. For example, locating population growth adjacent to planned strategic employment areas (such as proposed along Highway 400 by the amendment) can reduce transportation demand, enable more efficient and better public services (e.g. wastewater treatment, better library services and fire services), and avoid inappropriate changes to the rural character of existing villages/towns.

Countryside living in the 21st century will be economically more difficult than in the 20th century, and growth management that focuses on clustering population and employment in compact, mixed-use whole communities will have the clear advantage.

Prepared by SUDA

* Intensification refers to the addition of new housing and/or non-residential units within existing built-up areas.