

ADJUSTING GROWTH EXPECTATIONS



Rob Jowett

The provincial government is proposing changes to the growth plan, including population target adjustments and a longer planning horizon, in an attempt to prepare for longer-term population and employment growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. However, some fear that the proposed changes could lead to overdevelopment of greenfields and urban sprawl in the province.

On June 16, The **Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing** released the [proposed amendment](#) to the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), 2019, which includes changing the methodology it uses for land needs assessments, making it easier for producers of construction materials to open new mineral aggregate operations, and making approvals for mixed-use development easier to secure around major transit station areas (MTSAs), in addition to revising growth forecasts for municipalities by extending planning horizons for which the province forecasts growth. Currently, the planning horizon for the growth plan is until 2041, however, the province is seeking to extend it to 2051.

The growth plan for the GGH is the central guiding planning policy for the Greater Toronto area, the Niagara region, and the surrounding counties and towns. The public comment period for the proposed amendment is open until July 31.

“Ontario is consulting on proposed changes to [the growth plan] that would help bring more housing, essential infrastructure, jobs and business investments to the region,” Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing spokesperson **Praveen Senthinathan** told *NRU*.

Currently, the provincial growth plan is based around a population projection of 13.5-million people and an employment projection of 6.3-million jobs in the Greater Golden Horseshoe by 2041. Under the province’s amended plan for projected growth by 2051, the province would plan for at least 14.9-million people and seven million jobs in the GGH, based on more recent population projections drawn from a [study](#) conducted by **Hemson Consulting**. The province’s proposed changes to the existing growth plan are intended to allow municipalities to make better

long-range planning and policy decisions for the Horseshoe as the region expects to continue to see rapid population growth. Currently, the Greater Golden Horseshoe has a population of around 9.2-million residents.

“I certainly see the proposed amendment to the growth plan as being positive, and quite frankly, overdue,” **Ontario Home Builders Association** policy director **Mike Collins-Williams** told *NRU*. “A couple decades out, right now, 2041 seems like a long way away. But the reality is, when you’re planning for major water and wastewater infrastructure, for transportation infrastructure, and in doing long-range land use planning, our planning system and infrastructure system do move somewhat slowly, so it’s very important that municipalities are doing this long-range work.”

As part of the proposed changes, the ministry [released](#) a new methodology for how land needs assessments are

proposed to be conducted in an attempt to ensure that municipalities can provide an adequate supply of housing and employment types to meet market and infrastructure demands. The proposed new methodology would mean land needs assessments, which are how municipalities determine what their particular land use needs are within municipal comprehensive reviews, would follow an outcomes-based approach that is intended to be simpler and more flexible than the current ways in which land needs assessments are conducted. The public comment for that proposal is also open until July 31.

The proposed changes would also remove the existing prohibition on establishing aggregate mining operations, such as quarries and pits operating to extract materials for use in construction, within endangered species habitats within the natural heritage

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areas of the GGH in order to make the materials cheaper to extract, thereby lower housing costs. The changes to permissions for land use for aggregate mining operations would not apply to lands within the Greenbelt.

New policies proposed under the amended growth plan would allow municipalities to convert lands located within provincially significant employment zones (PSEZ) for non-employment uses without a municipal comprehensive review in order to allow more housing to be built quickly. Ontario is facing a housing supply and affordability crisis and the provincial Conservative government has made the mission of increasing the housing supply a top policy priority since being elected in 2018.

In 2019, the provincial government changed the growth plan to allow lands zoned and designated for employment use to be converted to non-employment uses during a municipal comprehensive review without approval from the Municipal Affairs and Housing minister. At the same time, the province created the PSEZs

designation to ensure that some employment zones would still require ministerial approval in order to be rezoned for non-employment uses. This change is intended to facilitate mixed-use development in PSEZs, many of which are also MTSAs.

“Major transit station areas perhaps should not be planned as single-use zones, be that exclusively residential, or exclusively industrial, or exclusively commercial. These are really going to be the areas where we’re going to have that dynamic, mixed-use... transit-oriented communities,” says Collins-Williams, adding that the proposed changes represent a shift away from highly prescriptive municipal planning policies around what uses are allowed where to an older model that relied more heavily on landowners themselves determining the best uses for a site.

Ryerson University Urban and Regional Planning School professor **David Amborski** told *NRU* that the PSEZ policies are one of several important changes being made by the provincial government. He says changing the planning horizon and population projections are the most important elements of

the proposal, as they will help municipalities to make longer-term planning decisions. He adds that the changes to the land needs assessments will also help municipalities make better planning decisions, as they will allow municipalities to be more flexible in their ability to respond to market demands.

“The idea [behind the changes] is that you have to understand the [land use] market and work with the market on these things,” says Amborski. “You can plan all you want, but if there’s no market for what’s [planned] there, it’s not getting built... Input methodology [like the land needs assessments] feeds into that and permits [development] to happen [and] can certainly help supply [the best forms of housing].”

However, there are concerns around the environmental impacts of the proposed changes. **Environmental Defence** executive director **Tim Gray** told *NRU* that if approved, he believes the proposed policy changes would cause municipalities to plan for the highest possible population projections, which could lead to significant sprawl due to the lower costs of construction on undeveloped land and the greater flexibility in uses than are typically possible on land that previously has been developed. He adds that because the provincial growth projections are based on Hemson’s research rather than on federal census data, they are not tied to official data and the

expected number of people and jobs could be hugely overstated.

“It’s likely that they’re [municipalities] going to end up choosing population projections that are very high,” says Gray. “That’s what leads to the gobbling up of more farmland, forests, wetlands and stuff outside of existing boundaries. And... [the ministry is proposing] that those numbers that are developed through [the provincial] process would not be the maximum. So you would be free, as a municipality, if there’s enough pressure on you from the developers, to choose even higher [growth projection] numbers, you know, presumably without any data at all to substantiate them.”

Gray says there is currently a lot of land available across the GTHA for building, and that the province should instead be focussing on policies around brownfield redevelopment and building complete communities rather than trying to push for more greenfield development. He adds that he supports the changed PSEZ policies if they will encourage densification around transit stations rather than facilitating sprawl. 🌱