

School of Cities Critics Misconstrue Clayton/Amborski on Greenfield Development/Sprawl

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A School of Cities commentary by Chapple and Pendall misinterprets our July 6 blog that argues that greenfield development need not be sprawl.¹ We are not advocating the type of low-density greenfield development built 50 years ago but rather development supporting densities and built form as specified in the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* ("Growth Plan"). This plan clearly supports the achievement of complete communities on greenfield lands.²

The main point of our blog was that all greenfield development is not sprawl as labelled by some urbanists and media. This clarification is important as the region will need both infill and greenfield development to address housing supply issues, provide a range of housing choices and meet the housing needs of millions of new people by 2051.³ We argue that if greenfield development is overly constrained, it raises housing prices and shifts demand to other areas, including the existing urban area and fringe municipalities. Further, affordability will be negatively affected throughout the region.

It is important to be aware that much of the density and built form resulting from the Growth Plan for built-up and greenfield areas has started to be realized only recently. After the Growth Plan was approved in 2006, municipalities underwent a conformity process for their planning process. The conformity process took several years before the local official plans were revised to incorporate the Growth Plan regulations. Municipalities are only now completing their conformity processes for the most recent iteration of the Growth Plan (2020). The planning process also takes time; once lands are designated as greenfields, it generally takes up to ten years or more after designation for the lands to go through the approvals process, obtain servicing and for housing to start to be built.

Development in North Oakville can be used to illustrate the diversity of housing being built on greenfield lands in compliance with Growth Plan policies. Since the lands came on stream in 2011, a total of 8,445 housing units have been started, with 42% single-detached houses, 37% townhouses, 19% apartments, and 2% semi-detached houses. This is quite different from the typical suburban development seen in the 1950s!

In Hamilton, the City's land needs assessment consultant estimated an overall greenfield density of 14.4 units per net acre (35.6 units per net hectare), assuming the Growth Plan's minimum intensification factor for growth 2021-2051.⁴ This significantly exceeds the average of between 8 and 10 dwellings per acre that Chapple and Pendall assert is the prerequisite for what they call healthy, environmentally sound and inclusive communities.

Chapple and Pendall may be right in that Ontarians "want growth that's healthy, environmentally responsible and inclusive," though we have not seen any empirical evidence to support this view. We know from various consumer surveys that many Torontonians want to live in affordable ground-related housing with a garage, green space and a ground-level entrance.⁵ We suggest that the populace's strong desire for ground-related housing norms should be reflected in the objectives of urban and regional policies much more than is the case now.

We are surprised by Chapple and Pendall's recycling of a flawed 2014 report from the Pembina Institute⁶ on "the kind of healthy, environmentally sound, and inclusive communities most people in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) say they want." We offer two observations: (1) a word search finds the words healthy, environmentally sound, and inclusive are not even mentioned in the 2014 Pembina Institute report; and (2) while 81% of respondents to the Pembina Institute survey said they preferred a location-friendly community, 80% of respondents said they already lived in a location-efficient neighbourhood!⁷ So it seems there is a wide gap between what planners and the community in the GTA regard as a complete community.

As for diversity, it was not something that we addressed in our commentary. However, as argued above, the millions of more residents expected to arrive in the GTHA by 2051 can not be accommodated only via "missing middle", infill development and by eliminating exclusionary zoning. These tactics are an important aspect of addressing the housing supply issue. Still, they will not provide a complete answer to the need for housing in the region, as pointed out by the Province's recent Housing Affordability Task Force, of which Amborski was a member.⁸ In addition, we observe that immigrants and new Canadians choose to live not only in infill areas but also in greenfield developments. For example, this can be seen if you examine the population characteristics of Markham, Brampton, and Richmond Hill.

In conclusion, the Growth Plan clearly supports the achievement of complete communities in existing built-up areas and on greenfield lands with a compact mix of housing types and land uses. Our opinion remains the same: the greenfield development envisaged in the policies of the Growth Plan is not sprawl. Ignoring the housing demands for ground-related housing types will lead to higher housing prices and longer commutes as households move further afield to find available ground-related homes.

Sources:

¹ Karen Chapple and Rolf Pendall (2022) 'Greenfield development does not equal sprawl. So what? We can do better.' School of Cities. [Online] Available: <https://www.schoolofcities.utoronto.ca/node/3760>; and Frank Clayton and David Amborski (2022) 'Is All Greenfield Development in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area Sprawl? A Resounding No.' Centre for Urban Research and Land Development. [Online]. Available: <https://www.torontomu.ca/content/ryerson/centre-urban-research-land-development/blog/blogentry68.html>

² Section 2.2.7 of the Growth Plan. Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (2020). “A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, Office Consolidation, 2020.” [Online]. Available at: <https://files.ontario.ca/mmah-place-to-grow-office-consolidation-en-2020-08-28.pdf>.

³ The GTHA is forecast to grow by 3.4 million between 2021 and 2051. Growth in the larger GGH is forecast to be 4.6 million persons over the same period. Hemson Consulting (2020). ‘Greater Golden Horseshoe: Growth Forecasts to 2051. Technical Report prepared for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs.’ [Online]. Available: <https://www.hemson.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HEMSON-GGH-Growth-Outlook-Report-26Aug20.pdf>

⁴ Lorus and Associates (2021). “City of Hamilton Land Needs Assessment to 2051.” Prepared for the City of Hamilton. [Online]. Available: <https://www.hamilton.ca/sites/default/files/media/browser/2021-03-18/grids2-ped17010i-appendixa.pdf>. The intensification factor refers to the minimum proportion of new housing in a municipality which must be built in the delineated urban area.

⁵ See for example Frank Clayton (2022). “What Kinds of Housing Are Homebuyers or Intending Homebuyers in the GTHA Choosing?” [Online]. Available: https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/centre-urban-research-land-development/CUR_Preference_Homebuyers_Intending_Homebuyers_GTHA_June_2022.pdf

⁶ Cherise Burda (2014). “2014 Home Location Preference Survey: Understanding Where GTA Residents Prefer to Live and Commute.” The Pembina Institute and Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) [Online]. Available: <https://www.pembina.org/reports/2014-home-location-preference-survey.pdf>

⁷ CUR published a comprehensive look at the Pembina Report earlier this year. Frank Clayton (2022). ‘Most GTA Residents Preferred but Also Said They Lived in a Location Efficient Community: 2014 Pembina/RBC Survey,’ Centre for Urban Research and Land Development. [Online]. Available: https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/centre-urban-research-land-development/CUR_GTHA_Urban_Digest_May_18_2022.pdf

⁸ Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force (2022). ‘Report of the Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force.’ [Online]. Available: <https://files.ontario.ca/mmah-housing-affordability-task-force-report-en-2022-02-07-v2.pdf>

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