

Hard Urban Boundaries with Kevin Eby, Ann Joyner and Peter Lambrick

Q&A response provided by speakers following the webinar

How do you factor Heritage building/housing areas into this paradigm?

KEVIN: Planning for urban areas and the expansions thereto is often consideration of a variety of alternatives that create a “best fit” scenario. The need to accommodate growth while at the same time protecting or respecting water resources, environment, heritage, compatibility with surrounding uses (industrial, etc.), site contamination, transportation and other infrastructure capacity, agricultural land, aggregate resources, hazard lands, etc. all go into the hopper and hopefully a reasonable best fit scenario emerges.

Heritage is one of the considerations that needs to be weighted fairly highly in this process, as it is easy to overlook and irreplaceable when lost. But it too cannot be considered absolutely sacrosanct unless it has been assessed and placed into context through processes such as designation as heritage structures, incorporated into heritage conservation districts or, to a bit of a lesser extent, considered as part of a cultural heritage landscape. Not everything old is worth saving in a best fit scenario, but that which is ... is. If they elevate to that level, they are important and need to be protected to the extent necessary within a best fit context.

Curious to know how you feel about the Province reducing density, and what the consequences will be for our growing urban communities?

KEVIN: I recently addressed this issue in part during a presentation to the 2021 Farmland Forum (see link below). It is in the first third of my presentation which is the first one in the conference.

<https://www.bigmarker.com/ontario-farmland-trust/2021FarmlandForum-The-Shifting-Landscapes-of-Farmland-Protection?bmid=c8f0e33bea6a>

I think the latest reductions in the DGA (Designated Greenfield Area) when put into context with what can now be excluded from the density calculations are absurd and not well thought out. A strict reading of the rules could likely result in the unbuilt portions of the DGAs as of 2019 being almost entirely single-detached units.

The purpose of the DGA densities is to create transit supportive densities in the DGA, reduce the amount of agricultural land being consumed for urban uses and to ensure a mix of units that wasn't being created pre-Growth Plan. Unfortunately, the latest changes accomplish none of these objectives and it can reasonably be argued that the current densities actually make it a worse situation than existed before the original Growth Plan came into effect.

ANN: The addition of 10 years of growth and the revisions to the Land Needs Assessment are going to have the effect of pushing out multiple urban boundaries across the GGH.

Ann's response to a question about research on density: Research on the benefits of higher density complete communities has been completed by the Neptis Foundation and the Canadian Urban Institute. These publications will be on-line:

<https://neptis.org/publications>

<https://canurb.org/publications/>

Is there any study being done or that has been done to explore the idea of “new towns” or “satellite cities” in many parts of Ontario where there is none or very poor agricultural land?

KEVIN: I am unaware of any since the development of Townsend down by Lake Erie in the late 70s / early 80s. Expected and prepared to accommodate tens of thousands of residents near what was expected to be large additional employment opportunities at Nanticoke, it today houses only about 1,500. Best described as “What if someone planned to build a city and no one came?”

<https://www.skyscrapercity.com/threads/abandoned-ontario-townsend.2044278/>

<http://www.townsendretraced.ca/project.html>

ANN – There is one I know of

<https://neptis.org/publications/should-rural-settlements-greater-golden-horseshoe-be-focus-growth>.

This publication argues against growing rural settlements because of the need for expanded infrastructure and commuting that often result from rural settlement expansion. Of course, the outcomes of working at home as a more mainstream approach to employment may drive a desire for rural settlement intensification and support of rural communities - which will have both positive and negative consequences.

How does Halton Region determine WHICH land to allocate for a planning timeframe? Is there any land that is NOT prime ag that can be used.? Can prime agricultural land be left out of the equation for Halton per Waterloo's plan?

KEVIN: The agricultural capability is identified on Map 1E of the Halton Official Plan. The majority of lands directly adjacent to the urban areas in Halton are Prime Agricultural Areas making agricultural capability likely not a prime factor in determining where to expand. It is also important to note that many non-prime areas are non-prime because they contain higher order environmental features (wetlands etc.) in large quantities so are not necessarily the best places to go when looking at best fit of all the competing objectives.

ANN: The Growth Plan provides very specific direction about what is to be protected in the planning process including environment, culture, agriculture etc. Please see

<https://www.ontario.ca/document/growth-plan-greater-golden-horseshoe/protecting-what-valuable> for details of what must be considered and protected in deciding what land should be opened for urban use.

Halton will have to complete the necessary studies and conversations to consider all of these factors to make the difficult decisions about expanding urban boundaries if such a boundary expansion is necessary to meet Provincial targets for growth in population and employment.

What about high density sprawl? Around VMC many applications coming in and pushing for heights greater than Official Plan permits. Support density but these are bringing 1000s of homes, seems to be coming before transit/transportation structure will be in place.

KEVIN: Generally higher density developments if properly planned for reduce the demand for land and drive the viability for putting transit into place. It is often a chicken and egg scenario in many municipalities when it comes to transit versus higher densities. Can't have higher densities without transit and can't have transit that is even remotely able to contribute reasonable amounts of revenue (seldom if ever pays for itself) to its on-going operation to warrant implementation. Unfortunately, many municipalities to this day look at roads as a necessary upfront "investment" and transit as a "subsidy". Transit needs to go in early or travel patterns (including the purchase of the second car) will be set and hard to break.

Could you speak to your density scenarios versus updated targets across GGH, Ann?

The scenarios shown are indicative of the range of densities that will be considered across the GGH. The challenge is to blend the range of densities and building types to create a complete and vibrant community and to place increased densities in areas where supporting infrastructure is efficient and effective.

Kevin: Doesn't the Region of Halton's Natural Heritage System outline a kind of hard urban boundary?

KEVIN: To the extent that the NHS is considered as a no touch area, yes from the outside looking inward. It needs to be matched up with that perspective from the inside looking outward. Hard urban boundaries are really only successful when the planning for the urban area assumes there is a finite end to the expandability and roads, pipes and other infrastructure decisions are made which reduce the potential for future outward pressure. Barriers like the NHS are only barriers until the "best fit" of the day determines that the perceived need for more urban land outweighs the value of the environmental features. If an expansion is easy, it weights future urban use of the land higher than if an expansion is difficult in determining the future "best fit" of the objectives.

The idea that baby boomers could be encouraged to move out of their homes to make way for young families is very interesting. Don't there need to be more places that will accommodate seniors, accessible, especially bathrooms, close to shopping, medical, etc?

KEVIN: Absolutely. For the past several decades we have built suburbs to accommodate young families. We are closing in on the point where there are enough lower density units to accommodate at least the

near future for the reduced percentage of housing that will be occupied by young families. The real issue is how do we free up young family-friendly housing for them. This isn't social engineering.

Baby Boom seniors have life expectancies that far exceeds that of the generation that came before them that typically aged in place (stayed in the family home until they left in a box or were no longer capable of independent living). Retiring debt-free at 65 with a life expectancy of 71 or 72, while having four to five children typically living somewhat near-by to look after you in your single storey two to three bedroom 1,000 to 1,500 square foot home near transit to age in is a very different scenario than many Boomers face as they enter retirement. Many Boomers are carrying some level of debt into retirement, consider the equity in their home as part of their retirement planning, expect to live into their eighties, have fewer children (who have typically scattered throughout the province/country/world chasing education and employment opportunities), own a two storey 2,500 square foot home with three to four bedrooms and are located in suburbia where transit is either unavailable or is of poor quality when they are unable to drive in the future. Their future is very different than their parents' generation.

The question is, do we accommodate seniors in their oversized homes as long as possible before helping them into assisted retirement care or nursing homes, or do we work to develop age-appropriate opportunities for them. With many living into their nineties (and soon over 100), there may be opportunities for a continuum of housing from the younger retiree who wants to travel with carefree housing to use as a base through housing with some assistance provided, to retirement home like scenarios with meal preparation to what we have today. I suspect in the near future we may see seniors move multiple times in their retirement to units along the continuum if it exists. If we create that type of a continuum, their existing single detached units will be freed up for young people.

So the question becomes, is new construction to accommodate young people, or is it to once again accommodate the Baby Boom (as it has for the past 40 years) but in a different stage of their life? Depending on the answer to that question, the future looks very different. To me, that answer is obvious.

No one in Canada actually owns the land. We are custodians and the ultimate owner is the state...hence expropriations. Which can be justified, if they are for the greater good. So I've been told by one of our top lawyers. Municipalities should not cave in so easily to developers. Do you agree?

KEVIN: I think technically the actual owner is the Crown, with our use of the land secured through fee simple ownership. While that is technically correct, I think how most people perceive ownership today represents the operational reality. Municipalities are to some extent bound by their ability to finance defence of their positions taken. Developers who, given the financial stakes associated with increased value in land associated with development approvals, only have to win one or two out of ten such fights to make them worthwhile, are in a very different position from municipalities who have to fund such fights through the tax base with virtually no ability to recoup such expenditures even if they win. The rules today favour the challenger and until they are adjusted to level the playing field it will continue to be a problem.

A bit of a leveling (although for the wrong reason ... that's a topic for another day) has occurred with the elimination of the right of appeal when the Province approves the Council adopted results of an update

to the official plan to bring it into conformity with the Growth Plan. It is not unreasonable to assume between five and ten million dollars was spent on the Region of Waterloo land budget hearing in 2012 (which accomplished virtually nothing in the end). That hearing would not happen today as such an approval by the Province is now unappealable. So now Councils can at least show some backbone without fear of facing multi-million dollar expenditures having to defend themselves against people with sometimes deeper pockets and lots to gain. It's a first step ...

Are there examples from around the world where people's mindsets re: intensification have changed for whatever reason?

KEVIN: Don't need to look further than Waterloo. While we used to face the same NIMBY challenges as others, a serious effort at educating the public as to the benefits of intensification in a "best fit" world has made a huge difference. Many people now realize that if properly implemented, intensification is a lesser evil than sprawling out onto our aquifer recharge areas that we draw our municipal water supply from. Combine that with the provision of alternative housing opportunities for seniors to allow them to age in age-appropriate dwellings in their neighbourhood rather than just in their existing home, the opportunity to access rapid transit thereby reducing the need for the expense of a second car or maybe a car altogether, the protection of environmental areas / farmland, etc, and the creation of the type of urban amenities that attract the young mobile high tech worker and the companies relocating to access such an employment pool and ... you have what has happened in Waterloo Region.

This report done for the Region by Urban Strategies **is amazing**:

https://issuu.com/region_of_waterloo/docs/central_transit_corridor_community

ANN: This one is good too on visualizing density:

<https://canurb.org/publications/visualizing-density-and-the-drivers-of-complete-communities/>

Ann: I have worked with the municipality and planning department for nearly 10 years and there is not enough focus on visualization and allowing input for collaborative and meaningful conversations that sets the stage for a gradual shift that balances the focus for the future with the equity rights of today. So where does that shift come from when communities delegate and try to have a say and it appears to fall on deaf ears?

You raise a good point. There has been an increase in using visualization to explore options on the ground and to work with stakeholders. The publications of Neptis and CUI noted above explore intensification and equity issues and provide some tool-kits. However, in the end, change usually comes from the grass-roots when citizens are galvanized to speak out and speak together to demand the kind of change they desire.

Living in a hamlet that has one more piece of land that is designated as a minor urban centre yet there is not enough water to service it has been proven by at least three different attempts with different developers. How do you get council to agree to rezone?

Rezoning is a tough process as typically it is the zoning that ultimately established the value of the property. Once zoned people can borrow against that value, meaning they often have a seriously vested interest in protecting the value associated with existing zoning. The recent elimination of the right of appeal when the Province approves the Council adopted results of an update to the official plan to bring it into conformity with the Growth Plan provides the opportunity for municipalities to clean up such messes, provided they can convince the Province to go along. If the designation in an official plan supporting the zoning can be rolled back to prohibit future development of the land, the rezoning becomes a much easier process. Convincing a Council to do so is difficult, but now maybe not impossible.

Any tips for the environmental community in engaging with the agricultural community to oppose the rampant development that destroying our farmlands and natural areas?

Kevin Eby: Promote the things that reduce the pressure rather than just focusing on protecting the outside. Some of the most effective approaches I have seen by both environmental groups and agricultural organizations are when they promote intensification, investments in transit and urban design initiatives that support higher densities.

Ann alluded to the changes with Covid but I wonder how seriously planners and govts are taking the concept of "reset". This time gives us an opportunity to rethink some things around community, sustainability, etc. it seems like timelines for some projects are in place and no one wants to stop to re-think (ie 413)

Kevin Eby: I think that is a critical part of the next five years. Things have changed dramatically but is it a permanent change or temporary? Will people swing back to transit? Will people be able to continue to work at home? Will the young people that were just moving on with their lives, only to have it interrupted for several years by this process, be able to recover? These are all questions that the answers to will change what happens over the next 20 years. Pretending we know at this point what will happen to 2051 is naive at best. We need to take a deep breath, do just what we need to do and let the dust settle a bit. The municipal processes to extend their OPs to 2051 should be reverted back to no more than 2041. Can't stop entirely, but leave us room to adjust before we get too far out.

ANN: I agree with Kevin. We need to take a pause and let people adjust to managing COVID and the aftermath. We need to speak out to request this of the Province and our municipal leaders. There is a real opportunity here to take a new and better path that is better for people, our environment and climate. There is a lot of work going on to explore new futures and to lobby for change. See for example the Urban Land Institute (Toronto chapter) <https://toronto.uli.org/events/uli-toronto-webinars/> or the Canadian Urban Inst noted above.

What are the hard urban lines for Halton?

Kevin Eby: The only truly hard urban boundaries in Halton are the boundaries established by the Greenbelt.

ANN: Municipalities are required to accommodate growth as defined by the Province and to update their Official Plans on a five year basis. This means that urban boundaries change over time. As Kevin says, the Greenbelt and Niagara Escarpment are the hardest boundaries we have and so far, the Province has not attempted to reduce these protected areas.

Ann - you mentioned that the density of complete communities can affect affordability. Do you mind expanding on that?

Ann Joyner: A range of housing types will include apartments and condos of different sizes as well as townhouses and single family homes. Each of these has a different price point. But, affordability isn't just about the home building but also about access to reasonable employment, healthy/culturally appropriate food shopping, transit and other mobility options, public infrastructure (day-care, health-care, parks, recreation, places of worship, clean water and sanitation). Higher density areas, when planned well, usually have a greater range of access to these amenities in close proximity. Municipalities can also encourage truly affordable housing by making appropriate public lands available for development or through agreements with developers.

Curious to know how you feel about the Province reducing density, and what the consequences will be for our growing urban communities?

Kevin Eby: Complex answer because it is difficult to compare between the various Growth Plans as the take outs from the density calculations changed at the same time. Using 2006 as a baseline they would be 2006 at 50 residents and jobs per ha. The 80 in 2017 equates to about 70 using the 2006 base and the 50 in 2019 would equate to about 42 using the 2006 base. This is a ridiculously low density. It is not transit supportive and allows for virtually all the development in the greenfield to be singles. Needs to be raised at least back to the original 2006 densities and take-outs and could likely go to 60.

I recently addressed this issue in part during a presentation to the 2021 Farmland Forum (see link below). It is in the first third of my presentation which is the first one in the conference.

<https://www.bigmarker.com/ontario-farmland-trust/2021FarmlandForum-The-Shifting-Landscapes-of-Farmland-Protection?bmid=c8f0e33bea6a>

Also answered in more detail to a question above.

ANN: The addition of 10 years of growth and the revisions to the Land Needs Assessment are going to have the effect of pushing out multiple urban boundaries across the GGH.

What about the 30 year planning horizon? Typically it's 20 years? So in York this means that 80% of whitebelt taken up into urban boundary (prime farmland), My understanding is if planning horizon was 20yrs such a large expansion would not be necessary?

Kevin Eby: I don't support 30 years. It should be restricted to 20. We don't know with Covid what will happen in 5 years let alone 30. We need to pause and not go beyond 20.

Urban vs suburban? Buyers often want single family detached homes, even when they deplore sprawl. Residents in stable areas don't want intensification in their neighbourhood, even when they deplore sprawl. How to resolve?

Kevin Eby: 64 million dollar question. The real answer is education. You need to get out and work with the community so they begin to understand first that intensification meets a need and can be done sensitively and second that the alternative to intensification is unsustainable sprawl. If people can expand their focus and begin to recognize both the best fit of competing interests and that increases in density can be done in a manner that improves rather than detracts from the community we will be successful. (see previous answer to similar question above for more detail)

Does planning include space for community veggie gardens?

Kevin Eby: It can, but doesn't necessarily do so. These are the types of amenities that you need to request and make priorities with Councils.

Kevin, you bring up a very interesting view of relooking at brown and contaminated sites and looking as development in areas that can be repurposed for mixed use especially with changes in demographics, shift to complete and walkable communities and through a balanced approach, create a hard boundary to preserve agricultural lands and greenspaces but guide growth to planned growth nodes and more compatible development in stable neighbourhoods which allows gradual change. How do we take a more inclusive approach and allows the community a voice in the process as opposed to a checkbox at the end of a process or study which discourages participation and ultimately makes all these policies ineffective at increasing taxpayer dollars?

Ann Joyner: One possible benefit of COVID has been a move to virtual consultation. We are finding much higher participation rates with more diverse populations which is a good thing. We hope the future will include both virtual and in person consultation.

Kevin: In addition to what Ann has said, I think education of the community through the creation of support documents is very useful.

This report done for the Region of Waterloo by Urban Strategies, which went through an incredibly extensive public consultation process, **is an amazing example of what can be done working collectively:**

https://issuu.com/region_of_waterloo/docs/central_transit_corridor_community

I love the idea of encouraging seniors to vacate their single family homes and move to smaller homes. The issue is affordability. Moving from a single family home in a less dense neighbourhood to, eg. a condo or townhouse in a more walkable neighbourhood means paying about as much or even more to move. It's far cheaper to stay in the single family home, even when it's too big, not in a walkable neighbourhood. This is a huge disincentive to moving out of the single family neighbourhood. How can this be solved?

Kevin Eby: The real issue is can we assist seniors into more appropriate lifestyle type units while keeping their cost down. The equity. Today an existing single detached unit in most communities exceeds that of the type of unit that most people would want to move into. While they may not be able to pull out significant equity, even a sideways move into the type of unit better suited to their new lifestyle may be a positive. This is where good financial planning assistance may be helpful. I have a number of friends who after doing the financial analysis and considering their changing lifestyle have moved from singles to rental units. The relative certainty of no huge house repairs, increasing condo fees or assessments and a much more competitive marketplace in Waterloo given the increase in this type of housing made it make sense for them.

(ALSO A REPEAT OF PART OF AN ANSWER ABOVE FOR CONTEXT):

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When building all the new homes in Milton, why would most of it have been built as single family homes forcing greater density in other areas in order to meet future density requirements?

Ann Joyner: Some areas were approved a long time ago and those approvals are still in place and will continue to build out. In some municipalities, there are a lot of such pre-approved areas.