

Position Paper on the proposed Pickering ‘Growth Management Study

Constrained urban growth boundaries and the limitation of urban sprawl are proving to be critical to the future success of urban environments. Such policies have proven their effect in cities such as Portland, Oregon while sprawl has revealed its devastating effects in cities like Los Angeles and, to a more limited extent, areas of the GTA (Greater Toronto Area).

When Portland first adopted a strict urban boundary in the 1970’s that was entrenched through legislation passed by the State of Oregon, many said it was the city’s end. Refusing to believe Portland could grow without conforming to the usual methods of sprawl, they wrote it off. Instead of dying it flourished, and is now one of the most livable cities on the continent. Even more surprising to its critics is that it is the 2nd fastest growing city in North America – 2nd only to the gambling capital of Las Vegas.

The City of Toronto now understands the inherent benefits of choosing density over sprawl and has just received a land mark report that speaks to the urgent social, environmental and transit needs to stem uncontrolled development. The plan lays out a specific course to increase the GTA by 5 million people through urban intensification and a revitalization of our existing urban context. It is a study that should be heeded as it contains a great deal of valuable advice as to the appropriate direction of development within Pickering, Durham and the GTA.

I believe in the principals of new urbanism wholeheartedly, which underpin the above referenced study, and I think their universal application is critical to the future success of the GTA. In this respect, I believe that the ‘Growth Management Study’ being contemplated by our Council is ill advised.

The ‘Growth Management Study’, as approved by City of Pickering Planning Committee for the Council of the City of Pickering’s consideration, would set aside existing policy structure and open the door to development of the agricultural assembly – a collection of 5,000 acres set aside by the Province of Ontario for agricultural usage.

In my opinion, it is vital that the agricultural assembly not be developed. Aside from providing a large and unbroken reserve for agriculture, it acts as an essential buffer for the Rouge and a natural barrier to the sprawl that pushes towards us from Scarborough and Markham. This land was rightfully set aside by the Provincial government of the day, has been recognized and protected in our Official Plan, the Regional Official Plan and by easements which our council introduced with extensive discussion and public input. The assembly is entrenched in more than 20 years of planning and detailed policy structure. It is not a new idea or one that was introduced to be swept aside at the first opportunity to develop.

Seaton, however, has been identified through the same processes for urban development. Under the 'Growth Management Study' the extensive work to build the policy structure that grounds Seaton would be set aside. Innovative and award winning work such as the 'Seaton Structure Plan', which lays out a unique and progressive vision for growth in the area, would be essentially tossed out. Instead, all lands would be up for consideration.

Clearly the lands within Seaton that hold environmental significance should and must be protected and, in this respect, current policy needs some revision. Newly identified areas of environmental significance will likely result in less land for development and an overall lower population number for Seaton but should not translate into a search for more land to sprawl over. Instead, we need to employ progressive planning to increase densities within our identified urban zone and achieve our growth there.

The City of Pickering should be engaging in an environmental review of Seaton and the agricultural preserve as is being contemplated through the 'Growth Management Study'. This study should be used to refine the existing policy structure not to search for lands in previously protected areas for new sprawl to occur. Our urban growth boundaries are clear in our freshly approved Official Plan and should not be so easily redrawn.

There are other, more pressing concerns that bear consideration as well. The Province of Ontario is on the brink of dealing with the Pickering implications of the ORM (Oak Ridges Moraine) land swap. If we were to open the agricultural assembly for development consideration on the eve of provincial engagement – we all but give them cart blanche. If we state that our policy structure is fluid and disposable then they will treat it as such. How are we going to defend our position when we have none – when we engage in a process that throws everything up in the air after 20+ years of planning and public input? The answer is that we cannot – we will make ourselves vulnerable to a Minister's Order with no way to defend against it.

The matter gets more entangled. Three years ago the Province of Ontario, through ORC (Ontario Realty Corporation), began to dispose of its holdings within the agricultural assembly. Concerned that the land would not be protected from development and that the ORC would ignore the City of Pickering and Region of Durham Official Plans, the City of Pickering and Region of Durham pushed hard for the establishment of agricultural easements. They were heralded at the time as a tool to ensure the creation of a permanent legacy. The stated intent was to protect the assembly for agricultural uses and stave off speculative purchases by developers. Now, three years later, as the Mayor is still signing the final easements, the same City of Pickering Council - with the exception of one new member - is considering opening up the assembly for development. Land that was sold for \$3,000 - \$7,500 an acre would be worth more than \$100,000 if opened up – riches would be abound and the optics of the whole mess...I hardly need explain how bad it will look.

The final issue for consideration is the practical reality of this whole mess actually being approved by the various levels of government that would need to give their assent to the agricultural assembly being opened up for development. The Region of Durham has recently adopted Pickering's Official Plan and only three years ago not only adopted the placement of agricultural easements but joined the City of Pickering in advocating them. Is it reasonable to accept that they will be so willing to abandon fundamental policy in favour of developing an area never before contemplated for development? This should be a rhetorical question. Further, the Province of Ontario has been explicit in its support and recognition of the importance of the assembly. Given that the assembly would also represent competition to the provincially held Seaton, it would defy imagination that they would allow its development.

In summation of the above arguments;

- The agricultural assembly has never been contemplated for development in any government plan, anywhere or at any time.
- After more than 20 years of planning and public meetings it was determined the assembly holds great worth to the City of Pickering, the Region of Durham and the Province of Ontario as a permanent agricultural reserve
- The City of Pickering just passed a 25 year plan that guides all of our land use planning - being our Official Plan - which was also endorsed by the Region of Durham that clearly identifies the assembly as being for agricultural uses not urban development.
- The portion of the assembly that was sold as farmland for less than \$7,500 per acre from ORC was done on the basis of very clear zoning and Official Plan direction. The land, if opened for development, would be worth more than \$100,000 per acre and would have been sold under false pretenses.
- The assembly is now almost wholly owned by developers who want to open the lands for urban expansion.
- The City of Pickering's 'Growth Management Study' would have the developers in the agricultural assembly pay for the study which is a clear conflict.

In short, the whole plan to open the agricultural assembly for development consideration is lunacy. Doomed to failure, this 'Growth Management Study' is set to cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars while causing serious damage to the Corporation of the City of Pickering's reputation.

Council is set to consider the Growth Management Study at its meeting of Monday, May 20, 2002.

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