

DEPUTATION REQUEST

REGIONAL COUNCIL

OCTOBER 21, 2021

Subject: Land Needs Assessment and boundary expansion

Spokesperson: Susan Lloyd Swail

Name of Group or person(s) being represented (if applicable):

Brief summary of issue or purpose of deputation:

To communicate the opportunity to build differently in York Region. Employment has changed significantly due to the pandemic and many analysts are predicting many physical retail locations and major office space may remain vacant. It is important York Region update its employment lands inventory before making decision on land needs for employment uses as the pandemic has shifted places of employment and disrupted retail. This aspect of the municipal comprehensive review should be deferred until after the economy recovers, post-pandemic or the Region may be extending expensive infrastructure for employment growth that does not materialize.

If you connect the dots: rising inequity, unemployment, housing and infrastructure costs, pandemic recovery, a mobile workforce and climate change, it is evident a new approach to community planning is needed. For communities the new challenge will be attracting workers and immigrants who can choose to live and work anywhere in the world. Climate change and a mobile workforce requires us to think differently about city building. Continuing to build the same built form, that paves over finite farmland will not make York Region an attractive destination.

OFFICE OF THE REGIONAL CLERK

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October 18, 2021

York Region Council
17250 Yonge St,
Newmarket, ON
L3Y 6Z1

Re: Item F.1. Alternate 2051 Forecast and Land Needs Assessment
Scenarios

Dear Chair and Members of Council,

I urge you to support growth through intensification within existing urban boundaries. The 2051 forecast and land needs assessment scenario that you are voting on today is unprecedented. Traditionally land use planning occurs in 10- or 20-year increments as it so difficult to project future growth. Past experience indicates that even 20-year forecasts overestimated the amount of land needed for development.

In 2019 York Region committed to sustainable infrastructure as noted in staff report based on the 2041 growth plan timeline...**“optimizing existing investments before triggering investments in additional infrastructure will be key to meeting provincial growth targets while supporting the principles of the Region’s fiscal strategy”**.¹ To move forward with expansions of infrastructure that does not pay for itself results in higher debt levels and leaves taxpayers on the hook for non-development related costs of growth. The 30-year timeline and lower greenfield targets in the revised provincial Growth Plan increases the chances of locking in unsustainable debt and unaffordable growth.

The forecast before you was prepared using the Growth Plan minimum 50% intensification target and a designated greenfield area density target of 60 residents and jobs per hectare. As York Region is currently building new housing at a density of 62 people and jobs /ha and as fewer people can afford existing housing, is the target high enough?

It is important to support a range of housing options and medium density growth as low-density growth doesn’t pay its way and is subsidized by existing taxpayers. Today, ground related housing is unaffordable to the majority of York Region residents due to the high cost of land, building costs

¹ <https://yorkpublishing.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=7787>

and lower wages. Home prices continue to grow faster than incomes.² A 2020 York Region Housing report noted that average ground related prices are affordable to less than 20% of households (the highest earning 20% of York Region households).³ Building more unaffordable housing is not going to make housing more affordable or reduce prices.⁴

Since the 2006 provincial Growth Plan the only municipalities to meet and exceed growth targets were Peel and Toronto. Both cities have more rental housing than York Region and attract more new immigrants. As current demographic analysis indicates the majority of new growth in the Greater Toronto Area will be dependent on immigration, as our current population is not replicating itself. Most new immigrants meet their initial housing needs through rental units. Is York Region supporting housing types that will meet future housing needs?⁵

It is important to understand a density target of 60 residents per hectare may not support a public bus system according to research data.⁶ The Region has built a bus rapid transit network with plans to build a more connected system. Moving forward the emphasis for new development should support the existing and planned transit network at minimum densities of 80 pp/j/ha as ensuring the growth target achieves fiscal sustainability is an important consideration.

Employment growth needs are uncertain. As of 2017, a third of the Region's employment land area was vacant, accounting for 2,588 net hectares. A 2020 York Region employment report noted a surplus of planned employment land.⁷ Recent conversions of employment land to residential approved by Council reduced the available employment lands. In March of this year, the Watson report identified 1100 ha of land is now needed for employment areas. Employment has changed significantly due to the pandemic and many analysts are predicting many physical retail locations and major office space may remain vacant. It is important York Region

² <https://globalnews.ca/news/7740756/home-prices-compared-to-income-across-canada/>

³ https://www.york.ca/wps/wcm/connect/yorkpublic/dbbd22a6-b4ed-4513-b60f-71993717843d/20036_HousingMattersUpdate_March162020.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=n3ALSMq

⁵ <https://www.tvo.org/article/a-very-long-journey-another-challenge-for-newcomers-finding-affordable-housing>

⁶ <https://www.pembina.org/blog/high-cost-of-low-density>

⁷ <https://yorkpublishing.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=10803>.

update its employment lands inventory before making decision on land needs for employment uses as the pandemic has shifted places of employment and disrupted retail. This aspect of the municipal comprehensive review should be deferred until after the economy recovers, post-pandemic or the Region may be extending expensive infrastructure for employment growth that does not materialize.

If you connect the dots: rising inequity, unemployment, housing and infrastructure costs, pandemic recovery, a mobile workforce and climate change, it is evident a new approach to community planning is needed. For communities the new challenge will be attracting workers and immigrants who can choose to live and work anywhere in the world. Climate change and a mobile workforce requires us to think differently about city building. Continuing to build the same built form, that paves over finite farmland will not make York Region an attractive destination.

York Region has thousands of units of retail spaces, strip malls sitting empty or underused, mainly on transit corridors. These empty spaces could be an opportunity to build differently. We may find that the loss of retail business may create and inspire significant opportunities for building reuse and mixed use development. By converting unused and underutilized retail spaces into housing York Region could provide more affordable and socially connected housing options along transit routes.

As a York Region taxpayer and a scholar of land use planning, I urge Members of Council to prioritize intensification and infill by supporting a no boundary expansion option. If you do approve the report today I encourage you to support phased infrastructure and growth in 10 year increments to designated greenfield areas rather than support a 30 year plan that will lock in taxpayers to unsustainable debt, higher taxes and more traffic congestion, making York Region an undesirable place to live.

Respectfully,

Susan Lloyd Swail, MES Pl. RPP