

# Delegation to York Region Council on the York Region Official Plan, Item G.1, June 30, 2022

Mr. Chairman, Mayors and Councillors,

While I appreciate that York Region planning staff, whom I greatly respect, have worked hard on the York Region Official Plan (YROP), there are two elements that I feel need to be amended in the YROP which I urge your council to address: (1) The plan for 50% growth on farmland including on the Oak Ridges Moraine; (2) The inadequacy of the transportation plan.

Here are the issues.

## 1) THE ERROR OF PUTTING GROWTH ON THE OAK RIDGES MORAINES

International news is currently full of reports that the world is about to experience the worst food crisis in 100 years. Oil is not the only cause of today's inflation; food supplies are not meeting soaring global demand either. The food shortage is already creating a disaster in parts of Africa and Asia, but experts are suggesting that as we come to the end of the harvest season, the problem will spread. The Ukraine War is sometimes cited as its cause because Ukraine is a major global supplier of wheat and sunflower oil. While it is true that the war in Ukraine is contributing to the problem, the cause is structural -- **the "water barrels" of our world are running dry.**

When I use the term "water barrels" I mean the places where water from rain and snow is captured and stored for many of the world's food-growing regions. Water barrels are mountain ranges that capture snow in winter, underground aquifers, and large freshwater lakes.

Lake Mead in Nevada is an example of a water barrel. Lake Mead is the largest reservoir in the US providing sustenance to 25 million people, including Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas and Phoenix as well as a massive area of farmland in Southern California and Mexico that produces much of North America's winter vegetables. Lake Mead has been below capacity since 1983, but it is now down to 26%. It is reaching what is termed "dead pool" status (not to be confused with the Ryan Reynolds character). It means water will no longer flow over the Hoover Dam. The cause of the problem is that Lake Mead is fed by another "water barrel", the snowpack of the Rocky Mountains from Wyoming to Colorado. The level of snowpack in these mountains is down dramatically and the situation is getting worse.

A similar problem plagues another "water barrel" in the southwest, the Sierra Nevada mountains on the border of California and Nevada. More than 75% of California's drinking water originates from the snowpack in these mountains. The farms that it waters produce half of the US's fruit, nuts, and vegetables. California has had three years of extreme drought and this spring the mountain snowpack in the Sierra Nevada mountains was measured to be 38% of its long-term average.

All of this might not be bad if the situation was temporary and other areas were able to pick up the slack. Unfortunately, they aren't. You may have heard about the 2,000 cattle that died in Kansas a couple of weeks ago from extreme heat. In the US Midwest, the massive Ogallala Aquifer that stretches from South Dakota to Texas, and which underpins about 27% of the irrigated land in the US, is drying up. Experts predict that even if no further water is removed from this aquifer, it will take 6,000 years to replenish it. These water shortages are creating panic. There is a growing lobbying effort in the US southwest for the US government to build canals to take water from the Great Lakes.

Disappearing water barrels are not confined to North America. This year, the longest river in Italy, the Po River, which gets its water from snowpacks in the northwestern Alps and which flows across the north of Italy to the Adriatic Sea is at its lowest level ever. The Po Valley is responsible for 40% of Italy's agriculture.

Similarly, the Himalayan Mountains are losing their glaciers. Experts estimate that the level of snow and ice in the Himalayas could be down by 2/3rds by the end of the century. To get a sense of how serious this situation is consider that this snowpack is the source of drinking and farm water for about two billion people in

Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and other countries. In India, the bulk of water for farms comes from groundwater. In northern India, the aquifers are down by about 20%.

This pattern is repeating itself in many other countries and regions of the world. But what is equally unsettling is the impact that the food crisis will have on migration. One of the reasons the US is seeing so many migrants on its southern border is that people from Central America can no longer grow food in their homelands because of drought and flooding and extreme weather events.

Despite the fact Ontario sits on the largest source of fresh water in the world, we are not immune. We have our own rain barrel challenges. The Great Lakes are largely renewed by snowpack which accumulates in winter. As temperatures rise, we may see reduced snowpack and lower lake water levels. If you don't think it can happen to a large lake just look at the Sea of Aral in Kazakhstan. It was once the fourth largest lake in the world. Its volume is now down to 10% of what it was in the 1960s.

**The Oak Ridges Moraine is a rain barrel for Southern Ontario.** The moraine sits above a massive aquifer that stretches from the Niagara Escarpment to Rice Lake. This aquifer feeds Lake Ontario, Lake Simcoe and Lake Scugog and provides water for both our farm ecosystem and over 2 million people. Putting aside the damage that is done to ecosystems when we put growth on the Oak Ridges, if we damage the ability of that aquifer to collect water, we damage our economy. The moraine also acts like a giant sponge providing flood protection during heavy rains to areas downstream. Paving over that land will damage the properties of that sponge. If we sprawl on it, we risk not only our farmland but our economy.

## 2) THE INADEQUACY OF THE YORK REGION TRANSPORTATION PLAN

The Ontario government anticipates that the GTA will grow by 2.9 million people in the next 25 years. As far as I know, these growth estimates do not include any estimates for climate refugees. Canada will likely become a top destination for those seeking a cooler climate.

The growth discussion in Ontario typically centres around three options: Sprawl, Tall, or Infill. The points I have made above explain the problem with sprawl. But the other two options are problematic too. Super-dense, super-tall buildings create social and mental health problems. The extreme densities that the Ontario government approved for the Yonge-407 TOCs, zoned to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> densest place on Earth, are going to make them unlivable housing wastelands full of crime and conflict. The "alleged" reason for the density was to increase ridership on the Yonge Street Subway, but that argument is naïve. The Yonge Street Subway is already at capacity south of Sheppard. With all of the development going on at Yonge-407 and down Yonge and along Steeles, it will mean the Yonge subway is useless. We are going to need to tunnel a second Yonge Street line just to meet demand. In the meantime, our roads in York Region and Toronto will become super congested.

The other growth option favoured for the GTA is infill. On the surface, this seems sensible, but what is being ignored is that people still need to get around. Whatever option for growth we take, if we add 2.9M people to the GTA and everyone still needs a car, the roads will create economy-crippling congestion. Jakarta, Indonesia offers us a canary in a coal mine. Congestion in that city is so bad that the Indonesian government is moving the capital out of Jakarta and off the island of Java altogether and moving to the Island of Borneo.

What the GTA needs is a wholesale change in the way we build our cities. We need to think about and build our transit network first. Simply extending subway lines is insufficient. We need an integrated network viewed as a superior option to cars. For suburban residents, the move to transit is especially painful. If cars are our normal means of travel, public transit must offer something better. Transit has three problems: (1) it does not take people to where they want to go, (2) it takes too long to get to a destination, and (3) it is not comfortable or convenient. For instance, how do you take your kids to soccer practice on transit in York Region? How do you go shopping?

If we are going to move to a transit model, we need a wholesale change in our thinking. We need to redesign our cities and lifestyle. The York Region Transportation Plan does not cut it. It offers nothing more than mild incrementalism.

## WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

We need our cities to put pressure on the Ontario government to prioritize a massive transit re-think. The 407 Transitway has been on the horizon for 20 years but nothing has been done to make it real. We must lobby our provincial government to make it a priority and centre our developments around it.

We also need to get the province to prioritize the electrification and integration of the GO lines. The current GO trains are designed for long-distance bulk travel. They take forever to start up and slow down and they are not appropriate for multi-stop service. It takes longer to travel on some GO lines (for instance Richmond Hill to Union) than to take the bus and subway to Union. GO trains also do not run frequently enough. These limitations make them ill-suited for the kind of travel we need in the future.

We need to rethink our vision of development, parkland, and travel. The concept of Transit-Oriented Communities (TOCs) is interesting, but the way the Ontario government is implementing them is a mess. We need to adopt the idea of living, working, and playing on the network – not just the community. More than Transit-Oriented communities, we need **Network-Connected Communities**. This means changing our thinking. Every community that is built needs to be plugged directly into a transit network that does not require a car. This includes putting parkland right on the network itself. If we can pull off a soccer league on a transit line with all the kids living in the Network-Connected Communities, we will have achieved the model we need.

Network-Connected Communities that are built on the 407 Transitway and the GO lines could easily house 2M-3M people. That would help us avoid sprawl and ensure we get efficient infill that works.

#### **WHAT YORK REGION COUNCIL NEEDS TO DO.**

Change requires leadership. The York Region Plan needs a change that affirms that (1) we will NOT BUILD ON THE GREENBELT or the Oak Ridge Moraine and (2) that all of the new communities we build will be network-connected.

It is not beyond our abilities to get this right but we need Council leadership to make it happen.

Thank you,

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