

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

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Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: The Greenbelt: How and Where Communities Will Grow

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PAPER: 2011-26

REVIEW DATE: January 2011

Shaping how and where communities will grow

The provincial government on February 28, 2005 announced the final boundaries of the new Greater Toronto Area (GTA) Greenbelt. This green space of 728,000 hectares (1.8 million acres) of land within the golden horseshoe has now been protected from urbanization and development. Premier Dalton McGuinty explains the major objective is to tackle urban sprawl. "The plan strikes a balance between the needs for growing communities and protecting agriculture and environmentally sensitive lands," he said. Most of the Oak Ridges Moraine north of Toronto is within its boundaries and much of the land from Vaughan and Markham to the south shore of Lake Simcoe is affected.

The Greenbelt Plan does several things that will shape how and where communities will grow over the next 25 years. Within the bounds of this permanent land reserve, population expansion will not occur outside of existing settlement areas. Fragmentation of agricultural lands is limited and new growth and development will be directed to existing urban areas, towns and villages flanking the greenbelt.



Simcoe County

For Simcoe County, the magnitude of the changes will be astounding. This municipality is heading for some of the most dramatic growth ever experienced in Ontario's history. In fact, some urban planners have gone so far as to name Simcoe County as "ground zero in the development wars".

A recent study by Hemson Consulting found that Simcoe County is one of the prime areas for migration from elsewhere in the province, primarily from the GTA and Hamilton. Its population grew by 14.3% in the most recent census period, the highest in central Ontario outside the GTA.

While this current growth is significant, it is minimal compared to what is to come. The Ontario Smart Growth panel projects an estimated 56% jump in population for Simcoe County by 2021. Simcoe County itself has projected similar dramatic numbers and anticipates by 2016 Barrie will grow by 55%, Bradford-West Gwillimbury also by 55%, and Wasaga Beach and Innisfil each by 52%.

Why has Simcoe County become the destination of choice? There are several reasons.

A significant factor, as noted, is the new provincial government Greenbelt plan. When you hop over this non-developable greenbelt you arrive squarely in Simcoe County. It is here that developers are making plans to expand and intensify their housing projects in communities like Bradford, Bond Head, south Barrie and Innisfil. In one of the most dramatic examples, the Toronto Star reports the Geranium Corporation has a proposal before the Bradford-West Gwillimbury town council to develop 2,400 hectares (6,000 acres) between Bradford and Bond Head that will add 115,000 people to the area's current population of 25,000.

Another factor is the result of the baby boom. Every seven seconds in North America, a baby boomer is turning 50. By 2021 the segment of the Ontario population that is 65 and over will increase to 18% from the current 13%. And these folks are retiring to communities like Wasaga Beach, Collingwood, Midland and Penetanguishene. David Foot, author of Boom, Bust and Echo 2000, reports that many young retirees are and will be moving from the GTA into communities that offer moderate priced housing, recreational activities, community amenities, and quality health care. For them, Simcoe County is the place to be.

Young families are also calling Simcoe County their home. Many are attracted to this area for the same reasons as the young retiree – moderately priced housing, recreation, amenities and quality of life. While a large proportion of these folks commute to the GTA for work, many are finding employment right where they live. Hundreds of diverse industries have found the region to be a good home as exemplified by the Honda car plant in Alliston with its 3,200 employees and Casino Rama near Orillia with 2,700 employees. The County website puts it this way: "One of the main pluses of Simcoe County is quality of life. The recreational and tourism opportunities in the County...will draw employers and employees looking for a more comfortable and less expensive life than Toronto can offer."

For the United Church, this dramatic growth in Simcoe County is of great importance. The reason is that some of the largest United Church affiliate numbers in Canada are right here. In Barrie, 17% of the population is identified as United Church. One out of five people look to the United Church as their community of faith. The numbers hold up across the County. For example, Collingwood also has a 17% affiliate pool, Innisfil and Orillia are at 18%, Midland and Wasaga Beach are at 15%. These are major numbers when one considers that numbers in Toronto are between 2 and 6%.

York Region

The Province of Ontario recently released its new forecasts for population, household and employment growth in York Region by 2031. The numbers are staggering. Population is expected to grow from the current 900,000 to 1.5 million people, an increase of 600,000 or 66%. The number of households will move from the current 254,000 to 500,000 over this same 25-year period. Employment will nearly double as the anticipated workforce moves from 430,000 to 780,000. Much of the Region of York is included within the new greenbelt area and will be subject to the development guidelines associated with the area. So the question becomes, "How will the Region find the space to accommodate 600,000 new people?" Over the next 25 years it is anticipated all the area's municipalities will continue to experience population growth. Most of the projected growth, however, (approximately 70%) will take place in the Region's southern municipalities of Markham, Vaughan and Richmond Hill.

Roughly 40% of this increase in population will be accommodated through intensification of the existing built up areas in Markham, Vaughan, Richmond Hill, Aurora and Newmarket. These communities will seek to establish high-density urban centres of no less than 200 people or jobs per hectare (80 people or jobs per acre). In addition, new developments on lands not affected by the greenbelt legislation will be required to meet density levels of no less than 50 people or jobs per hectare (20 people or jobs per acre). Rapid transit systems to move people among these high-density centres and between home and work are being designed and made operational.

York Region is preparing comprehensive plans to manage these very high levels of growth. The increases in population will require significant investments in infrastructure and a more streamlined approval process for development proposals. The Region will be adding roads, increasing water and sewer capacity and, as noted, expanding transit. More human services like hospitals and affordable housing initiatives are included in the design. Employment zoning designations will be added to lands adjacent to the 400 series highways in order to provide for the expected economic growth.

The affiliate numbers for the United Church vary greatly across the Region ranging from a high of 19% in Whitchurch-Stouffville to a low of just 2% in Vaughan. The United Church affiliate group in Newmarket is 13%, Aurora is at 17%, Richmond Hill with 5%, and Markham at 6%.

The Challenge for the United Church

For all faith communities, these areas are a place of spiritual discovery and growth: a place of welcoming. Church development leaders for most denominations venture into these rapidly growing communities knowing they must create something out of nothing. And they have a definite action plan that in most cases follows a very set pattern for church growth. They buy five or ten acres of land in a high-traffic, high-visibility location, they send in a team of two or three organizing ministers to get things going, they build a modern, energy efficient, high tech, clean, accessible and welcoming building. They have a two-acre parking lot, air conditioning and soft comfortable seating in the auditorium.

For church development leaders in the United Church, the experience is quite different. We have already been around for 150 years. So our presence is shaped by congregations located in the old downtown core of the towns and villages or by small Methodist chapels that were started as points on large rural circuits. The downtown churches often struggle with a lack of parking and buildings that are constantly in need of repair and upgrades. The "chapel" churches are very small in both size and membership and usually have less than – sometimes significantly less than – full time pastoral leadership.

The challenge for the United Church is to creatively, willingly and cooperatively make plans for how best to serve the new expanded populations in these regions. The age, size, design and location of our current buildings will need careful evaluation. The verbs used in the process must be experienced as exciting – relinquish, relocate, rebuild, work, and welcome. They can be exciting words if the vision is clear, if it is developed and owned by all the partners, and if it is built on the goals of sharing the Good News and giving people a place to grow in faith.

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