The Cornerstones of Community-Building

by Bryan Tuckey, MCIP RPP

Discussions on growth management have been prominent in 2001. Comparisons to the “smart growth” program in the United States are common, placing the growth issue at the forefront of current planning challenges.

Using the “smart growth” issue to galvanize programs and educate political leaders, the public, and their peers, the staff of York Region Planning and Development Services has focused its attention on demonstrating state-of-the-art growth management programs in York Region and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

York Region is one of the fastest-growing areas in Ontario. Effective growth management plays a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing the quality of life enjoyed by its growing, changing population. Growth management also influences the region’s economic competitiveness, contributing to its success in attracting and keeping job-rich industries and businesses.

Since the approval of the regional official plan in October 1994, York Region has had a comprehensive strategy for growth management and community building. The official plan builds on three interrelated concepts: sustainable natural environment, healthy communities, and economic vitality. These elements provide the cornerstones of the region’s growth management program, regional structure policy, and community-building planning approach. They also support York’s clear focus on quality of life.

The preservation and enhancement of the natural environment is exemplified in aggressive policy endeavours, such as the adoption of the “Greening of York Region” and “Regional Land Securement” strategies. Healthy communities are diverse places to live, work, play, and learn, where the built environment is sustainable and features high-quality design that produces safe, accessible, human-scale neighbourhoods. And finally, the theme of economic vitality refers to the role that a healthy economy and business environment plays in maintaining a high quality of life for citizens. A prosperous, business-supportive economy ensures that the job market keeps pace with population growth.

The six key principles that implement the region’s growth management strategy demonstrate the interconnectedness of the three themes:

- Firm urban boundaries within which most of the population and employment will occur;
- A system of centres and corridors that provide a focus for residential and commercial development;
- Comprehensive plans for new communities that are compact, well designed and transit-supportive;
- Identification and protection of a system of green areas and spaces;
- Analysis of the fiscal impact of new development; and
- Protection of agricultural and rural uses.

Since it approved the official plan, York Regional Council has supported a series of strategic initiatives that complement, implement and enhance the region’s collaborative, inclusive and comprehensive approach to managing growth. Each of these initiatives was seen as innovative when council approved the program. New programs include:

- A twenty-five-year financial forecast of development charges;
- Long-range water and sewer strategies;
- An integrated plan for the regional transit system and transportation;
- A “Greening of York Region” strategy;
- A “greenlands” strategy; and
- Vision 2026 (York Region’s strategic plan).

In an ongoing effort to manage rapid growth, the region established firm boundaries that may be altered only by amendment of the official plan. The official plan structure provides an innovative and comprehensive community-building framework. In York Region, council requires all new developments to complete detailed fiscal analyses involving long-range strategies for infrastructure.
The region has recently developed a strategy to coordinate the planning and delivery of human services for the region's rapidly growing and changing population. Implementation of this initiative adds the critical fourth cornerstone to the growth management strategy, complementing the land-use planning, fiscal analysis, and infrastructure strategies already in place.

This is not to say that all our efforts have been successful. While York Region has a long history of monitoring and measuring its own performance, future measurements of success must include urban structure analysis, which involves reviewing official plan policies regarding such aspects as urban areas and the nodes and corridors that determine the development patterns that growth will follow.

We must find ways to ensure that development proposals incorporate compact design and transit-supportive principles. We now emphasize intensification opportunities in regional development review. The success of the "nodes and corridors" policy must be continually re-evaluated. The region must influence and promote the provision of affordable housing and rental units. This involves maintaining the commitment to higher densities and finding ways to encourage the construction of apartments.

Planners who support effective growth management must also find ways to increase the variety of housing and uses, while balancing development with enhanced protection of "greenland" systems. Finally, planners should support efforts to decrease dependence on cars and to increase the use of transit.

York Region has provided a strong policy and regulatory framework, but policy alone is not enough. Refinement of the existing market drivers is required to steer growth in the Greater Toronto Area. As we have learned from the strength of growth-management incentives in the U.S., we must develop and implement programs that have a direct effect on urban structure and development patterns.

Growing awareness among citizens provides an opportunity for the Greater Toronto Area to reposition itself. The first step is to investigate the financial and regulatory tools that cities and regions in the United States use to implement smart growth initiatives. We can consider fiscal and market-driven solutions (such as location-sensitive mortgages) to influence individual spending and location habits. We should re-examine financial drivers of urban growth including tax structures, development charges, property taxes and senior government incentives, to ensure they support the development of sustainable communities.

If the GTA is to reach its full economic potential, we have to invest in infrastructure, affordable housing, transit, human services and, generally, in quality of life. By trying to resolve the gridlock in the movement of goods, the potential threats to air quality, and the shortage of affordable housing, we can assure the GTA's economic competitiveness.

We will need to foster partnerships between multiple levels of government, based upon the recognition that successful growth management is the result of significant investment and a strong framework of policy and regulation. The upcoming five-year review of the Ontario Provincial Policy Statement provides an opportunity to align policies and allows the provincial government to measure its policies against desired outcomes.

The current challenge for planners is to devise implementation strategies that complement the strong policies guiding the urban structure of the Greater Toronto Area.

---

**A Growth Snapshot in 2000**

- York Region is home to 772,000 people, having grown by more than 41,000 last year (5.8 per cent change). The region's population is expected to grow to 1.28 million by 2026.
- To house new residents 12,699 residential building permits were issued with a total residential construction value of $1.9 billion.
- The region's employment base is 380,000 jobs, and thus has kept pace with population growth.
- New construction building permits for additions and renovated industrial, commercial and institutional floor space totalled 20.3 million square feet.

York Regional Council's commitment to quality of life is illustrated in the "Community Building" section of the Official Plan (Section 5.2).

"Communities are a fundamental building block of this Plan. Communities are much more than the architecture of buildings and the design of neighbourhoods. Communities are places where people interact, learn, work, play and reside. Excellence in community design is essential to creating physical places where people have the opportunities and choices required to lead rewarding lives."

"Complete communities are healthy communities that incorporate principles of safety, accessibility, adequate human services and choice for all citizens."

---

**Summary**

Having an effective growth management strategy has enabled York Region to maintain and enhance the quality of life of its residents in a time of rapid growth. The strategy has four cornerstones, three of which are articulated in the region's official plan: sustainable natural environment, healthy communities, and economic vitality. The recent approval of a Human Services Strategy adds another component that complements the land-use planning, fiscal analysis and infrastructure strategies already in place. Planners must develop innovative implementation programs for these strong policies.

---

**Sommaire**

Une gestion efficace de l'expansion urbaine a permis à la région de York d'améliorer la qualité de vie de ses résidents malgré une croissance rapide. L'approche comporte quatre parties, dont trois sont décrites dans le programme régional officiel: un environnement naturel renouvelable, des communautés saines et un dynamisme économique soutenu. Une stratégie des services à la personne complète les volets d'utilisation du territoire, d'analyse fiscale et d'établissement des infrastructures. Les urbanistes doivent faire preuve de créativité pour répondre à de telles exigences.

---

**Bryan Tuckey**, RPP MCIP, is the commissioner of planning and development services for the Regional Municipality of York. Bryan has a master's degree in environmental studies from the University of Waterloo. He can be reached at: bryan.tuckey@region.york.on.ca