

Op-ed Article
Toronto's New Official Plan
Councillor Michael Walker
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In late May, Toronto planners released the long awaited Toronto Official Plan, a thick tome necessitated by amalgamation and accompanied by the requisite rhetoric and fanfare typical of recent civic pronouncements.

The clamour this time, of course, is that this plan is actually "official" in the meaning of the Ontario Planning Act. That is, all new by-laws and public works have to conform to it. That's the kind of clout that demands the attention of every citizen interested in the big picture future of their city.

On the face of it, the Official Plan is a grab bag of good intentions, nicely written and structured so as to be all things to all people. And there's not much harm in that.

For the most part, the document contains what might best be described as piercing insights into the self-evident. We are going to save the neighbourhoods, decentralize growth, build on the arterials, promote transit, recognize employment where it exists, push the same mixed use thesis that has been around for 30 years, respect green space, encourage good design and the arts. Same old, same old. In fact, if you took a snapshot of life in Toronto today and dressed it up in a report with some heady tourism marketing copy, you'd pretty much have the picture.

A visionary document it is not. Some of its policies, to be generous, are just plain funny.

Like the stated goal of minimizing the physical and visual boundaries between the city and Lake Ontario. A bit late for that, perhaps. Or the policy to improve the quality of the swimming beaches that we haven't been reliably able to swim at for decades due in part to the city's own inability to adequately treat sewage. Some transportation goals are particularly jocular, like the stern discouragement of automobile travel and commuting, and the need to increase the number of riders per car, without any realistic means of achieving either.

Other policies seem to fly blindly in the face of confirmed suburban practice and preference.

There is a call to preserve heritage buildings based on provincial legislation that is not intended to save anything, when the history of Toronto is truly the history of the bulldozer. There is the knee-jerk and noble call for housing for all people of all means everywhere, even though that ghost has long since assumed the status of a polite talking point. There is also the pious finger-shaking at sprawl, in spite of the fact that it is driven by overwhelmingly popular suburban decisions that have a century of strength behind them.

Of course, the devil lies in the administrative details, and there are three that are truly eye-openers.

The Ontario Planning Act makes it plain that the central function of an Official Plan is to manage and direct physical change. Without explanation, this Official Plan abandons one of its most valuable and traditional functions in doing just that – the regulation of maximum building density and height. It leaves that job to a dizzying array of old and incompatible zoning by-laws currently in place. As a result, the ability to precisely tie building form to land use policy is gone; so too is public certainty. We used to have the ability to judge a proposed change to a zoning by-law on the basis of clear Official Plan rules. Now, we intend to do it on the basis of loosey goosey policy intentions. Developers will love it.

Second, the Plan effectively overrides the authority of duly approved existing zoning densities where these are lower than densities in existing Official Plans, specifically stating that the assumed density for any proposal will be the higher of the two. Developers will love it even more.

For those who thought that this all might stem from a desire to remain hands-off from private interests, think again. In certain areas, the planners are very hands-on, actually requiring minimum development densities. If it's not big, we just don't want it.

This is a document whose only real visionary breakthrough lies in the abandonment of sound and proven regulatory control. We deserve much better.

Michael Walker

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