Government of Ontario Announces Proposed Change to the Growth Plan for Greater Golden Horseshoe

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On January 15, 2019, the Government of Ontario announced proposed changes to the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2017 (Growth Plan). The Government's stated objectives in proposing these changes are to increase housing supply, attract investment, and protect jobs in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH). The Government believes that the proposed changes, referred to as Growth Plan Amendment No. 1 (GPA #1), will make it faster and easier to build housing in order to accommodate anticipated population growth in the GGH over the next 20 years.

The following are some of the highlights of the proposed changes:

- A new policy that allows municipalities to carry out employment land conversions outside of a municipal comprehensive review (MCR)
- The introduction of "provincially significant employment zones"
- Policies that allow municipalities to carry out settlement area boundary expansions outside an MCR, provided the lands affected are not within the Greenbelt
- The introduction of "rural settlements" and permitted "rounding out"
- The ability for municipalities to refine provincial Agricultural and Natural Heritage System mapping
- Changes to intensification and density targets for municipalities
- Increases in major transit station areas to range between 500-800 metres and flexibility for municipalities to delineate and set density targets for these areas

Employment Planning

Employment Land Conversion

Section 2.2.5 of the Growth Plan outlines policies for employment planning. GPA #1 would make changes to policies governing the conversion of employment lands to other uses. In the current Growth Plan, employment land conversion is only permitted during an MCR, which is a process undertaken by municipalities to ensure their Official Plans are in conformity with Provincial-level planning policies. Certain key policies, including

those permitting employment land conversion, may only be implemented through an MCR.

While GPA #1 would maintain that employment land conversions will only be permitted through an MCR, a new policy is proposed to permit the conversion of employment land to a designation that permits non-employment uses prior to the next MCR, provided the conversion would satisfy specified criteria, including a requirement that a "significant number of jobs" be maintained on the lands. These conversions would only be permitted in the window between the introduction of the proposed Growth Plan, and the next MCR.

Provincially Significant Employment Zones

GPA #1 introduces a new concept of "provincially significant employment zones", which are zones identified by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing that are to be protected and cannot be converted to permit non-employment uses outside of an MCR. It should be noted that GPA #1 has removed the “prime employment area” designation.

Density Targets for Employment Areas

GPA #1 also proposes changes to policies regarding density targets for employment areas. Municipalities would now be required to set multiple density targets for employment areas rather than a single blanket target. There would no longer be a requirement to consult with the Province and other stakeholders when establishing these density targets nor to conduct an employment strategy. Upper-tier municipalities are still required to consult with lower-tier municipalities to establish density targets. A more detailed overview of density targets follows below.

Settlement Area Boundary Expansions

Settlement area boundary adjustments and expansions allow municipalities to expand or adjust their delineated settlement areas. Similar to employment land conversion, the current Growth Plan only allows for settlement area boundary expansions to be considered during an MCR.

GPA #1 would allow municipalities to adjust settlement area boundaries outside of an MCR, subject to criteria including that there be no net increase in land within settlement areas. The affected settlement areas cannot be rural settlements, or be within the Greenbelt.

Municipalities would also be permitted to conduct a settlement area boundary expansion in advance of an MCR where the amount of land being added to the settlement area is not more than 40 hectares. Rural settlements or settlement areas within the Greenbelt may not be expanded through this process.

Rural Settlements

GPA #1 introduces the concept of "rural settlements". Rural settlements would be a subset of "settlement areas" made up of small hamlets and small settlement areas. These rural settlements must be long-established and identified in Official Plans. They also must be serviced by private water and wastewater systems and contain a limited

amount of undeveloped lands that are designated for development. Rural settlements are not part of designated greenfield areas (areas designated for development to accommodate forecasted growth).

GPA #1 would allow municipalities to make minor adjustments to the boundaries of rural settlements outside of an MCR provided that the lands are not within the Greenbelt and that the adjustment constitutes only a "minor rounding out of existing development, in keeping with the rural character of the area".

Agricultural and Natural Heritage Systems

According to the government news releases, the changes proposed with regard to Agricultural and Natural Heritage Systems are aimed at implementing mapping systems that are accurate, are focused on protecting natural resources, and are aimed at building on the economic viability of the agricultural and food industries.

A variety of policies have been introduced that speak to the implementation of the Agricultural System and Natural Heritage System mapping identified by the Province. GPA #1 would provide that these maps do not apply in a given municipality until they have been implemented in the applicable upper or single-tier Official Plan.

The proposed policies would also allow municipalities to refine and implement provincial mapping. These refinements would only be permitted in the window between the introduction of the proposed Growth Plan, and the next MCR. Once implemented, these maps must only be refined during an MCR.

Intensification and Density Targets

GPA #1 proposes significant changes to the existing Growth Plan policies concerning intensification and density targets. These targets dictate how much new population growth must occur within delineated built-up areas (intensification) and the required density of development in designated greenfield areas (density).

Intensification

Currently, the Growth Plan sets out a single intensification target for all delineated built-up areas. These intensification targets set the minimum percentage of residential development that is to occur per year within the delineated built-up area. Currently the intensification target is 50 per cent until 2031. After 2031, the intensification target will be 60 per cent.

GPA #1 would give each municipality a different intensification target. They are as follows:

- 60 per cent: City of Hamilton, Regions of Peel, Waterloo, and York
- 50 per cent: Cities of Barrie, Brantford, Guelph, Orillia, and Peterborough. Regions of Durham, Halton, and Niagara.
- Maintain or improve on existing targets: City of Kawartha Lakes, Counties of Brant, Dufferin, Haldimand, Northumberland, Peterborough, Simcoe, and Wellington

These targets would take effect at the municipality's next MCR. Until then, the existing Growth Plan intensification targets would continue to apply.

Density

GPA #1 has also made changes to the density targets for designated greenfield areas. These are lands within settlement areas designated in an Official Plan for future development, but are outside of delineated built-up areas.

Currently, a designated greenfield area in any upper or single-tier municipality must be planned to achieve a minimum density target of 80 residents and jobs combined per hectare. GPA #1 would give each municipality a different density target. The proposed minimum density targets are as follows:

- 60 residents and jobs combined per hectare: City of Hamilton, Regions of Peel, Waterloo, and York
- 50 residents and jobs combined per hectare: Cities of Barrie, Brantford, Guelph, Orillia, and Peterborough, Regions of Durham, Halton, and Niagara
- 40 residents and jobs combined per hectare: City of Kawartha Lakes, Counties of Brant, Dufferin, Haldimand, Northumberland, Peterborough, Simcoe, and Wellington

Until a municipality has conducted an MCR and it is approved and in effect, the existing density targets will continue to apply.

Major Transit Station Areas

GPA #1 proposes changes to policies concerning "major transit station areas". These are areas surrounding existing or planned major transit stations, which typically include subway stations, light rail transit (LRT) stations, inter-city rail stations, and bus rapid transit (BRT) stations.

To promote transit-supportive development and allow for greater access to transit, higher densities are required in major transit station areas. Currently, major transit station areas are defined as the area within a 500 metres radius of transit stations. GPA #1 would define the radius as a larger range of between 500-800 metres.

The current Growth Plan sets out different density targets depending on whether the major transit station area is served by subway, LRT, BRT, or the GO Transit rail network. Currently, municipal councils can request a lower alternative to the applicable target through an MCR (subject to conditions). A proposed change would allow the Minister to approve lower targets outside of an MCR.

Lastly, a new policy is proposed to allow upper and single- tier municipalities to identify the boundaries of and set density targets for major transit station areas, provided it is in accordance with the *Planning Act*. This can only be done in advance of a municipality's next MCR.

References

- News release announcing proposed changes to the Growth Plan

- Proposed changes to the Growth Plan (Backgrounder)
- Draft amended Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2017
- Proposed Amendment to the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2017

BLG Can Help

For assistance in understanding how the proposed amendments to the Growth Plan may impact you or your organization, please contact any member of BLG's Municipal Planning Group.

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