

Metroland - Halton Division

Region wants public to get with the plan

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Most people don't get involved in the often murky world of planning until they find surveyors' stakes going in the ground next to their property.

But Niagara's regional government wants to change all that so regular folks get involved in mapping out what Niagara will look like in 25 years

During a year-long process that saw the region, the local municipalities and the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority recently carry out the biggest planning overhaul in Niagara in more than 30 years, it became clear to politicians and professional planners that most people are detached from the planning process that shapes what our cities and towns look like

"They weren't getting the type of engagement that was meaningful," said Patrick Robson, director of community integration for Niagara Region

Hence, the region's ambitious new growth management strategy, designed to clearly map out -- through an unprecedented public consultation process -- a region that is healthy and sustainable, with ample jobs, a vibrant arts and culture scene and communities designed so public transit becomes cost-effective and our reliance on cars is reduced. It means looking at how things such as hospitals, police services, fire services, parks, schools, water and sewer services and cultural and sports facilities need to be integrated into our communities, and how precious agricultural land can be protected for future generations.

The region says the time for developing such a long-term vision is now, because of significant provincial policies passed recently that hem in areas such as St Catharines and Lincoln, and mandate that downtown St Catharines be among a number of city centres in the province in which intensification must occur, so that it achieves a minimum density of 150 residents and jobs combined per hectare by 2031

Planning has a trickle-down effect in Ontario: the province makes the rules in a global sense and lower levels of government must adjust their planning guidelines to reflect provincial policy

The region says over the next several years, a lot of work will have to be done to ensure those local planning documents conform with provincial policy. That's where the public consultation comes in.

Niagara has had sluggish growth compared to other regions and typically sees many of its brightest young minds leave for greener pastures because of limited

job opportunities at home, said Robson. Providing clear direction of where growth is intended will make it easier for developers to invest their money in projects that will benefit the community, he said

"The whole point is to take the guessing out of it."

Robson said that might mean moving away from the decades-old model of spread-out suburbs with big, detached homes that make efficient transit difficult and which lead to sprawling roads and water and sewer infrastructure that are costly to maintain in the long run

But that in itself creates challenges, Robson conceded, because a detailed survey carried out in all 12 Niagara municipalities over the summer found that while the majority of residents say public transit is important, 82 per cent of us drive to work, most of us still want a nice home in the suburbs and most of us don't want to live downtown

Robson said people have to be convinced not to fear the word "intensification." He pointed to the former Stokes Seeds building in downtown St Catharines, being transformed into affordable seniors housing, a neighbourhood community centre, trades career centre and culinary arts and hospitality training centre.

"There's a perception that intensification means high-rise," said Robson. "That isn't the case at all."

In the past, the social and cultural aspects of communities weren't given much attention in planning. Today, there's a growing acceptance that things such as recreational facilities, entertainment venues, arts and heritage resources, education opportunities and access to medical care play a pivotal role in employers' decisions on where to invest or relocate, said Robson.

The region's survey also found most people realize change will, indeed, be coming to their communities in the years to come. To help it better understand what form residents want that change to take, the region is holding a series of workshops in which the public is invited to take part in sessions in which software can allow regular people to guide future growth of Niagara.

Known as NiagaraQuest, based on similar software developed in Vancouver, it allows both experts and laypeople to see how decisions we may today and in the years to come will shape the region's future

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