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| **Report from** | Planning and Building Services, Planning Services  |
| **Date of Report:** | February 8, 2019 | **Date of Meeting:** | February 25, 2019 |
| **Report Number:** | PBS-039-2019 | **File:** | 35.31.18,35.31.89 |
| **Subject:** | Proposed Amendment 1 to the Provincial Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Places to Grow) and Implications to the Municipal Land Use Planning Framework and Processes |

# Recommendation

That Council receive report PBS-039-2019 for information; and

That Council direct staff to forward this report to the Ontario Environmental Registry and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing on or before February 28, 2019 as the City’s official response for request for comment on proposed Amendment 1 to the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (P2G), with specific recommendation as follows:

1. That the Province continue to recognize and maintain, and where feasible enhance, the importance of Downtown St.Catharines as the only Urban Growth Centre within the Region of Niagara;
2. That the Niagara Economic Gateway Zone and the Welland Canal corridor be designated as a provincially significant employment zone;
3. That the Province re-evaluate and re-define measurement of employment density;
4. That the minimum housing intensification target for the urban area built boundary currently established in the Growth Plan not be reduced through Amendment 1and that consideration be given to increasing the target;
5. That the minimum density target for housing and employment on designated vacant greenfield lands currently established in the Growth Plan be maintained or increased through Amendment 1;
6. That proposed Amendment 1 remove the policy framework allowing opportunity for incremental expansion of settlement (urban) areas outside of an upper tier or single tier government Municipal Comprehensive review. FORTHWITH

# Background

**Provincial Land Use Plans**

Pursuant to the Planning Act, all upper and lower tier municipal Official Plan must be consistent and not conflict with the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) and Provincial land use plans:

- Greenbelt Plan (GB), established in 2005, revised in 2017

- Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe – Places to Grow (P2G), established in 2006, revised in 2017

- Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP) established in 1975, revised in 2017

St. Catharines is relatively unique in that, unlike most other municipalities, all three Provincial Plans have areas that fall within the municipality.

* All of the City’s agricultural lands fall within the Greenbelt Plan area, and are designated ‘specialty crop’, the highest land classification for protection established in the Greenbelt Plan.
* The Niagara Escarpment Plan borders the southern boundary of the municipality, and establishes strong policies for the protection of the world biosphere Niagara Escarpment.
* The Growth Plan sets out the urban area boundary and governs the manner in which municipalities may plan within the urban area.

In certain areas, the Plan areas of the GB and the NEP overlap, and portions of the NEP and the P2G overlap. The policies contained within the three Plans are all intertwined and must be read and implemented in conjunction with each other. Appendix 1 to this report identifies the boundaries of the three Plan areas and the urban area boundary.

**2015-2017 Provincial Plan Review and Amendments**

After a review initiated in 2015, the Province revised all 3 Plans finalizing them in 2017. Changes to the Plans support and encourage increased intensification and density targets, environmental protection, affordable housing, enhanced cultural and natural heritage protection, transit and infrastructure supportive development, and land, service and cost efficiencies.

**Proposed Amendment 1 to the Growth Plan (P2G)**

The Province is currently undertaking a further review of the P2G under the focus to provide greater flexibility and address barriers to building homes, creating jobs, attracting investments and putting in place the right infrastructure while protecting the environment. On January 15, 2019, the Province released proposed Amendment 1 to the Growth Plan. The deadline for municipal comment on the proposed Amendment is February 28, 2019. On February 4, 2019 the Province hosted one 3-hour roundtable session with area municipalities to present and discuss proposed changes to P2G contained in Amendment 1.

**Implications for Local Official Plan Land Use Planning Framework**

This report provides an overview of changes to the P2G proposed in Amendment 1 and the implications to the City’s Official Plan land use planning framework and current planning directives.

The majority of proposed changes through Amendment 1 will have no negligible impact on the current land use planning framework established in the Garden City Official Plan. In many respects, the proposed changes give greater clarity and autonomy to local municipal land use planning than provided in the current Growth Plan, most notably with respect to employment land conversion. This change is significant given the current Employment Land Needs Assessment (ELNA) currently being undertaken by the City.

Although the impact of Amendment 1 on the City’s land use planning framework is negligible, this report recommends changes to Amendment 1 to strengthen the Province’s land use policy framework.

City staff are also working collaboratively with the Region of Niagara and other local area municipalities to provide a one Region unified response to the Province on Amendment 1.

# Report

**Local Context**

In the opinion of PBS, the City’s Official Plan is consistent, does not conflict with, and in many respects, is stronger in supporting provincial interests established in the PPS

and the land use policies in the GB, P2G and NEP.

The Official Plan establishes a strong policy base for the protection of the City’s ‘world class’ agricultural lands and enhanced economic and cultural activity. With the exception of one minor change to include both sides of Martindale Road north of the QEW, the City has not altered the municipal urban area boundary since its inception 40 years ago in 1979.

The vacant land supply within the urban area has diminished over the years and there is not a significant amount of vacant developable land remaining. If to maintain protection of the City’s agricultural lands, and at the same time, provide and enhance opportunities for population, housing and employment growth, the City has little choice but to embrace intensification, a greater mix of uses, and the reuse, rehabilitation and rejuvenation of the existing built environment.

The Garden City Official Plan exceeds minimum intensification targets and density standards established in the Growth Plan for development within the urban area built boundary and on vacant greenfield lands, and promotes transit supportive and land, service and cost efficient development. It provides for a wide range of housing opportunities for all choices and needs, and supports mixed use, walkable and accessible neighbourhoods.

The Garden City Official Plan also places a strong emphasis on the protection and enhancement of the City’s cultural and natural heritage, on urban design measures to support compatibility with a greater mix of uses, to balance the old with the new, and the built with the natural environment.

**Amendment 1**

Proposed changes to the Growth Plan are grouped under 6 categories. The following provides an overview of proposed changes, and the implications on the City’s local land use planning

**Intensification and Density Targets**

* The original 2006 Growth Plan established a minimum intensification target for 40% of annual housing growth and development to be achieved in the urban area built boundary. Under the 2015 review, this target was bumped up to 60%. Amendment 1 proposes to lessen the standard to 50%.

The P2G establishes a minimum density target for housing and employment development on vacant greenfield lands (vacant lands within the urban area, but outside the built boundary). The density is measured in people and jobs per hectare. In the 2006 P2G, the minimum density target was 50 people and jobs per hectare. In 2015 the target was increased to 80. Amendment 1 proposes to reduce the target back to 50 people and jobs per hectare.

The P2G also establishes a minimum density target for Urban Growth Centres (UGC). St. Catharines downtown is the only UGC in Niagara Region designated by the P2G. The P2G establishes a minimum density of 150 people and jobs per hectare (approximately 85 dwelling units/ha) in the UGC, and Amendment 1 does not propose any changes to the City’s UGC and density target.

* Although it would appear to be high, a density of 50 people and jobs per hectare reflects suburban development and equates to approximately 20 units per hectare (6 to 8 dwelling units per acre). In the opinion of PBS, the reduction in the minimum intensification target and density standard proposed in Amendment 1 weakens the provincial directive to support and achieve intensification of the built environment.

Notwithstanding, the provincial targets are minimums and the City’s established intensification target is for 95% of new housing to be developed within the built boundary. As well, the minimum density standards established in the Official Plan on greenfield lands, and on many other vacant and currently occupied lands within the built boundary is significantly higher.

The change in the intensification target and minimum density standards proposed in Amendment 1 will not impact the current land use plan established in the Official Plan.

**Settlement Area (Urban Area) Boundary**

* The Growth Plan requires that any urban area boundary expansion be evaluated through an upper tier MCR, and is subject to specific eligibility criteria. Amendment 1 weakens the criteria to evaluate a boundary expansion and provides that boundary expansions of up to 40 hectares may now be considered outside an MCR process, provided that there is no net increase in lands added to the urban area, and subject to provincial approval.
* The proposed policy change does not apply to urban area expansion on to ‘specialty crop’ lands, and as such, will not impact current City land use planning policy. However, it may certainly have impact on other municipalities, and in the opinion of PBS, there should be greater, not less, policy oversight and strength of evaluation criteria to ensure protection of agricultural lands and stop incremental absorption.

**Major Transit Station Areas (MTSA)**

* An MTSA is to be planned for transit supportive, mixed use and medium and higher density residential and employment opportunities. The P2G applies a range of minimum density standards to be achieved around a MTSA, depending on the service level and infrastructure provided. This density can be balanced and spread out over an area of influence 500 metres (0.5 km) around the station. For a station served by GO Transit, the minimum density standard is 150 people and jobs per hectare.
* Amendment 1 does not change the minimum density standard, but does propose to increase the area of influence to 800 metres, enabling density to be spread out over a greater area, and effectively lessening the requirement to provide higher density transit supportive development within the immediate vicinity of the transit station site.
* The City has 2 major transit stations (GO Station at Great Western St. and the Downtown bus terminal). Technically, neither meets the P2G definition for an MTSA. However, the bus terminal is located in the UGC which is planned for a high concentration and mix of transit supportive development, and meets the minimum density target for an MTSA. The City, in conjunction with the Region, recently adopted the GO Transit Station Secondary Plan (GTSSP) for the area centered around the GO Station and extending for a radius of up to approximately 800 metres. The (GTSSP) also meets the minimum density standards for MTSA’s established in the P2G, provides for compact higher density mixed development at the station site, and is based on planning policies supporting integrated transit supportive, medium and higher density, mixed use, and connected development throughout Plan area.

Proposed changes to MTSA policieswill not impact current Official plan policies established around the City’s transit stations.

**Employment Lands**

* **Employment Land Conversion**

Proposed changes to the employment land conversion policies in the P2G are significant and beneficial for the City.

Currently the P2G only permits consideration and evaluation of employment land conversions through an upper tier MCR of the Official Plan. The Region of Niagara is currently undertaking a MCR of their Official Plan but is not expected to be complete for another 3 years.

 **Local Land Needs Assessment (LNA)**

Prompted by the closure of GM on Ontario Street, the City identified the need to evaluate the viability of the subject lands for continued employment use or redesignation for alternative uses. The site represents a significant landholding of 20 hectares (50 acres) in the middle of the City. However, the GM lands cannot be looked at in isolation. The City has 2 other significantly large vacant employment sites within the urban area (Port Weller and lands south of the NHS hospital). Combined these properties comprise 50 hectares (120 acres) of land. The potential conversion of employment lands also has implications on the existing residential and commercial land use framework. The conversion of employment lands must be evaluated based on a comprehensive analysis of the City’s entire land use planning framework.

Cognizant of the size and potential defining opportunities the City’s vacant employment lands present, whether continued employment or other, and in an effort to reduce the Regional MCR timeline, the City has initiated its own Lands Needs Assessment (LNA) review including employment, commercial and residential land uses.

* **Process**

The Land Needs Assessment (LNA) review is scheduled for completion in Q4 2019, and is evaluating employment, residential and commercial land needs across the City in keeping with provincial policy and methodologies.

 Upon completion and Council approval, the intent is to use the LNA to inform the Regional MCR, and at the same time, request consideration from the Region and province to approve any recommended employment land conversions outside of the Regional MCR.

* **Amendment 1**

This LNA process described above varies from current provincial employment land conversion policies and would require provincial buy-in at the end of the process if to be allowed. However, it does not vary from employment land conversion policies proposed in Amendment 1.

Amendment 1 allows more local autonomy in evaluation and process respecting local employment land conversion and provides a one window opportunity for approval of a local Official Plan employment land conversion amendment outside an upper tier Regional MCR. If Amendment 1 is approved, this will give greater certainty to the timeline and process for the approval of the LNA.

* **Provincial Significant Employment Zones**

Amendment 1 introduces a proposed framework to establish provincially significant employment zones. These zones are to identify employment areas that are crucial to the Province’s economy. Any conversion of employment lands within these zones would require Provincial approval.

The current P2G identifies the stretch of the QEW from Niagara Falls to Fort Erie as a Gateway Economic Zone, and is the only location in the P2G plan area designated in this manner. Although outside of the City, this corridor offers employment opportunities for the Region as a whole and will benefit

St Catharines’ residents with job opportunities in the future. However, draft mapping in Amendment 1 currently does not include the Niagara Economic Gateway Zone as a provincially significant employment zone. This should be addressed and rectified prior to any formal approval of provincially significant employment zones.

Additionally, the Welland Canal is a Provincially and nationally significant transportation corridor, and offers significant employment opportunities. Staff recommend the Welland Canal corridor extending from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie be considered for inclusion as a provincially significant employment zone.

* **Measuring Employment Density**

The P2G measures employment density by jobs per hectare. Amendment 1 does not change this. Establishing minimum employment densities based on jobs per hectare is problematic and unwieldy as some of the largest and most prominent employment land uses (warehousing) are very land expansive and employ very few persons given advances in technology. The significance and size of warehousing may become even more prevalent with increasing internet retail sales (Amazon, Ebay, etc), forcing greater need for warehouse space.

This issue has been previously identified to the province by many municipalities and staff recommend that the province continue to evaluate other and additional means to address employment land densities.

**Natural Heritage System**

Amendment 1 proposes policy changes to better reflect the importance of local mapping of natural heritage features. This is something that the City, along with many other municipalities, has requested of the province previously. Provincial natural heritage mapping is typically taken at a higher level, not ground truthed, and can be inaccurate and outdated. Amendment 1 shifts the emphasis to reliance on local mapping, while still having regard for a provincial mapping overlay. In fact, the City’s Official Plan mapping does just that. It identifies local natural heritage mapping and an overlay identifying the outer limits of provincial mapping.

Proposed changes to natural heritage policies serve to strengthen the policies and planning framework already established in the Official Plan.

**Rural Settlements**

Amendment 1 proposes changes to rural settlement policies applying to small hamlets and villages in the countryside. Proposed policies are not applicable to St. Catharines and are not addressed in this report.

# Financial Implications

Not Applicable.

# Relationship to Strategic Plan

Amendment 1 to the Growth Plan ties into several aspects of the City’s Strategic Plan. These related goals and actions are listed below:

* Economic Sustainability:
* Attract public and private investment, support local businesses and provide excellent customer service to demonstrate we are open for business.
* Be an affordable city for all.
* Develop partnerships to enhance the economic vitality of the community.
* Social Sustainability:
* Strive for the highest quality of life for all citizens.
* Connect people, places and neighbourhoods.
* Environmental Sustainability
* Lead in the protection of our environment for future generations.
* Be prepared for the impacts of climate change.
* Cultural Sustainability
* Embrace our diversity and celebrate our heritage and history.

# Notification

That this report be forwarded to the Ontario Environmental Registry and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing on or before February 28, 2019 as the City’s official response for request for comment on proposed Amendment 1 to the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (P2G).

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