

Will the new City Council hold the line?

The Ottawa City Council elected on October 22 will at some point in the new term of Council oversee the next 5-year review of the City's Official Plan, and they will need to tackle once again the thorny question of whether to expand the urban boundary.

There has been no expansion of the urban boundary since 2013, when the OMB directed that just over 1000 hectares of rural land be added to the urban area in its decision on the appeals launched by landowners and developers of the City's 2009 Official Plan review, which authorized a much more modest expansion. There are still appeals pending on the City's last Official Plan review, which concluded that no additional urban land was required to accommodate population growth forecasted into 2036. So the new Council will be facing a lot of competing priorities and interests surrounding this issue.

In its recent survey of municipal election candidates, the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital asked a specific question on urban expansion.

“Every review of the official plan addresses expanding the urban boundary, which results in the loss of rural green space. As an elected official, what is your opinion of urban expansion? Are you more likely to support intensifying within the urban boundary or expanding into rural Ottawa? Please explain.”

An analysis of the text responses provided to this open question revealed that over seventy percent of respondents support intensification within the urban boundary rather than urban expansion. This includes all eight incumbent councillors who responded to the survey. The rest of the respondents indicated their support for some form of balanced approach, combining intensification within the urban boundary with some urban expansion.

Perhaps paradoxically, support for urban expansion increased with distance from Ottawa's urban centre. Nearly eighty percent of urban ward candidates indicated that they support intensification. In contrast, two thirds of rural ward candidates advocated for a balanced approach to development that mixed urban expansion and intensification, and more than a quarter of the candidates in suburban wards outside the Greenbelt said the same. Still, close to seventy percent of these suburban ward candidates said they thought intensification alone was the best policy.

If the respondents to the survey are representative of the Council that will eventually be elected, they may indeed hold the line in the next review of the Official Plan.