

Comments on the Discussion Papers for the 2021 Official Plan

1. We are facing a climate emergency. Following the lead of international organizations and other governments at all levels, the City of Ottawa has officially recognized this fact.
2. Over the timespan covered by the new Official Plan, we, collectively, must take dramatic, unprecedented measures to lower the concentration of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere.
3. We can achieve this by reducing our emissions of greenhouse gases, mostly by reducing the burning of fossil fuels, and by increasing our carbon capture and storage, mostly through trees, greenspace and wetlands.
4. In the development of this official plan, the city must make many choices about land use and supporting infrastructure. The measures selected must be the ones that result in the lowest levels of greenhouse gas emissions and the highest levels of carbon capture and storage. This is what we call the climate emergency test.
5. The climate emergency test must be the central unifying theme of the new official plan and the guiding measure of its success.

How do the 9 discussion papers measure up to this perspective?

The Building Blocks of a Healthy Ottawa paper perfectly positions what is at stake here. Fundamentally, the climate crisis is a public health emergency. The reason why climate change matters is the impact it has on human health and wellbeing, locally and globally. This is taking “liveability” at its most literal sense. Will Ottawa be liveable, will the planet be liveable, if we do not act now? The Health paper makes liveability a key outcome, which we fully support.

To keep Ottawa liveable, we need to reduce GHG emissions (addressed in the Energy paper), increase carbon capture and sequestration (addressed in the Natural Ottawa paper), and introduce adaptation measures (the topic of the Climate Adaptation and Resiliency paper).

The Energy paper gives a good account of programs and measures already initiated by the City and expected to carry on through the planning period. Energy Evolution in particular appears to be a good vehicle for pushing forward the shift away from fossil fuels to renewable sources essential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We question whether the target for reduction set by Council in 2016 is ambitious enough in light of the recognition of that we are now in an emergency situation. This should be addressed in the Official Plan. The paper lists the changes that the Official Plan will need to make to achieve significant GHG reductions: greater density in walkable complete communities; increase the use of active transportation; decrease vehicle kilometers travelled; increase zero-emission mass transit; set better building thermal energy requirements; support renewable electricity generation. A number of these changes offer new economic development opportunities, to which we will return in our comments on the Economy discussion paper.

The Natural Ottawa discussion paper, without saying it in so many words, addresses the carbon capture and sequestration side of the equation. It puts forward the merits and value of trees, woodlands and wetlands, in terms of ecosystem services they provide, a framework we support. The paper provides a good summary of current programs and policies relative to greenspace, a generally accurate assessment of the current state and emerging threats to urban and rural greenspace and opens the door to a refresh

of the City's Greenspace Master Plan. The notion of differentiation of the benefits of the natural environment across gradients of land uses and the focus on the critical risks to the urban forest and canopy loss are welcome. Overall, however, the importance of Natural Ottawa as part of the City's response to mitigating climate change through carbon sequestration should be emphasized more strongly and its measurement included in the City's GHG balance, not as an offset to emissions, but as a supplementary contribution to lowering CO2 concentration in our atmosphere.

The Climate Adaptation and Resiliency discussion paper deals with how we prepare for the eventuality of the negative effects of climate change, which are already being felt. It is a comprehensive paper that appears to cover all the categories of risk stemming from climate change. Section 3.1.4 cross references well with the Natural Ottawa paper and section 4.1.4 asks all the right questions about Natural Resilience, that is climate risks to green infrastructure itself. For example, we are counting on urban trees to shade and cool as an adaptation to higher temperatures, but how do we protect the trees themselves from the effects of those same high temperatures?

The Infrastructure and Water Management discussion paper asks the right questions and is well positioned on the intensification vs greenfield development issue. It was good to see trees, forests and natural areas listed as asset categories in the first sentence of the paper. However, there is little further attention paid to in the paper to the funding and renewal/replacement strategies for these asset classes. Perhaps there should be. The Housing paper's focus on rental housing, affordability and homelessness are vital actions for social equity and inclusion, and will help ensure that all residents benefit from the steps taken to manage the climate emergency. The Rural Ottawa discussion paper highlights the particular climate risks faced by agricultural operators and notes the contribution of rural areas to food security, both important climate adaptation topics. The demographic and economic challenges of rural Ottawa are described but insufficient attention is given to the potential for the green economy in rural Ottawa.

This brings us to the Economy discussion paper, which in our view is stuck in the past and offers little to guide a new Official Plan. It should focus on challenges and opportunities such as the share economy, social enterprises, precarious employment and income inequality, the circular economy and, in particular, the opportunities presented by the green economy. The Energy discussion paper mentions economic opportunities stemming from the transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources. The transition to a low carbon economy could stimulate new economic activity in a wide range of industrial areas, both urban and rural. What would Ottawa's version of the new green deal look like and can we get working on this right now?

Figure 1 shows what an official plan with climate change as the central unifying theme and measure of success would look like, with the discussion papers referenced where appropriate. Boxes with solid outlines represent major policy groupings of the Official Plan for which a discussion paper has been prepared. The discussion paper title is in brackets, italic font, under the box title. The boxes with dotted line outlines (Built form, Transportation) are policy groupings that are inferred or yet to come, for which discussion papers have not been prepared.

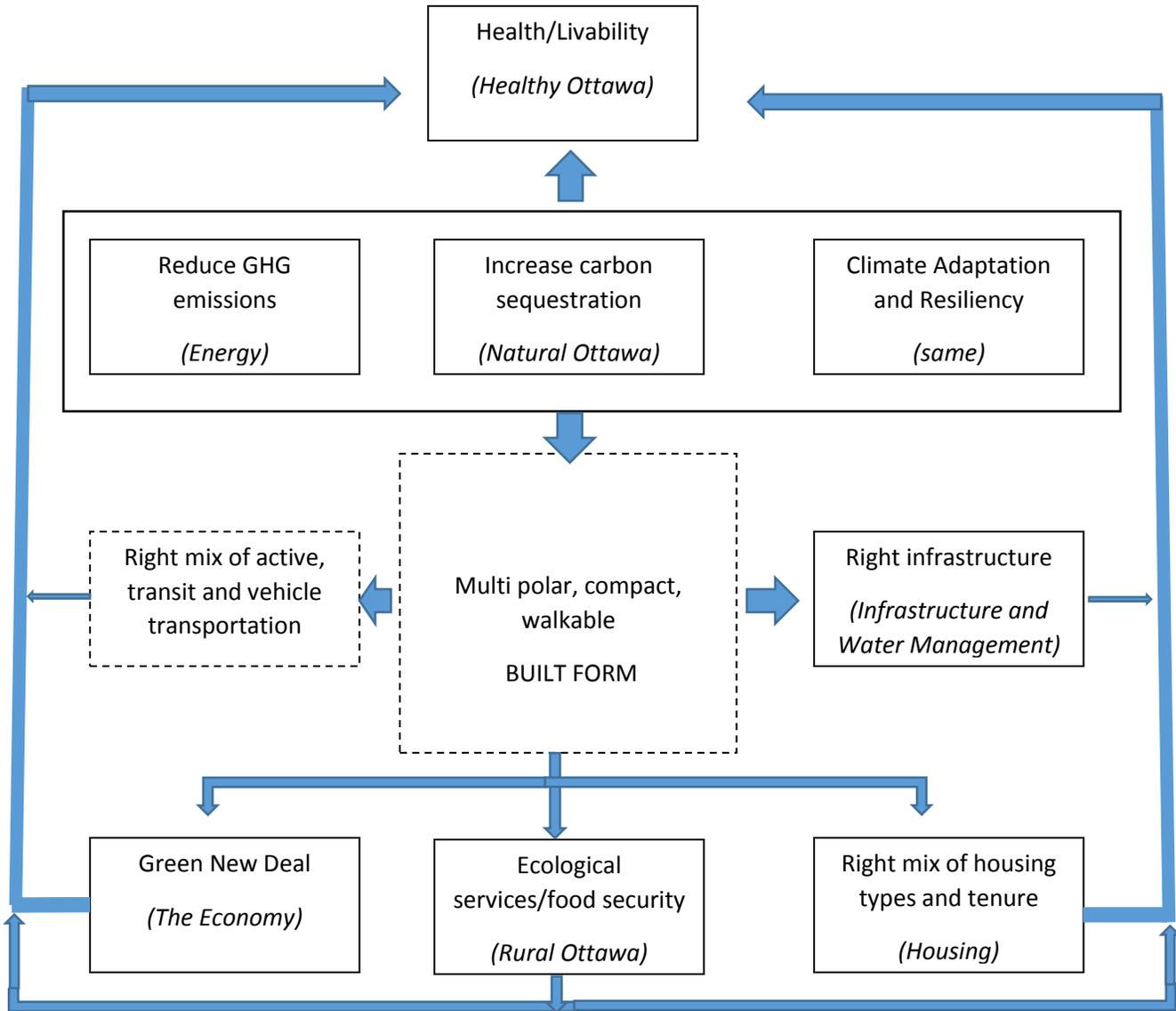


Figure 1

Climate change as the unifying central theme of the new Official Plan

At the apex is the Health/Liveability box, given as the ultimate expected outcome of the Official Plan: a healthy, liveable city for all. There are other elements contributing to this outcome not represented in the diagram, for example Safety and protective services. Only those elements traditionally covered by an official plan are shown. These OP elements are foundational, laying down many of the essential pre-conditions to public health.

Immediately under this primary outcome is a larger box containing the three policy groupings that directly address the climate emergency: reducing GHG emissions, increasing carbon sequestration and climate adaptation. Together they form a test through which all remaining policy groupings must pass so as to maximize the achievement of the ultimate outcome of a healthy, liveable Ottawa. The Building Blocks for a Healthy Ottawa discussion paper argues that this outcome is heavily dependent on addressing climate change. The up arrow illustrates this dependence.

The down arrow illustrates the constraints placed by this climate screen on the Built form block of policies. Although no discussion paper has yet been produced on this topic, many of the other papers are premised on the notion that a multi-polar, compact and walkable built form is the strategic direction that this official plan should take. This is a proposition with which we agree, that this is the right built form to achieve the best results for reducing GHG emissions, increasing carbon sequestration and climate adaptation.

Adopting a built form model that best responds to the climate change emergency informs, in the first instance, both the transportation and the infrastructure policy blocks. There is no transportation discussion paper, but both the Energy paper and the Health paper explicitly address the mix between modal shares, putting greater emphasis on transit and active transportation, and shifting away from internal combustion driven modes. In addition to the health benefits flowing from the climate change mitigation provided by these measures, both transit use and active transportation independently provide health benefits due to increased physical activity. This is illustrated in Figure 1 by the left long arrow pointing back to Health/Liveability. The Infrastructure/Water management paper also already anticipates a compact, intensified, built form and lays out the advantages, from a purely cost perspective, of adopting such a model. The long right arrow pointing back to Health/Liveability illustrates the clean water and sanitary services provided by City infrastructure, essential pre-requisites to Health/Liveability.

The Built form also informs, secondarily, the mix of type and tenure of housing, the role and status of rural Ottawa and the location of employment and economic activity, represented by the down arrow splitting to each of these boxes. There is a discussion paper associated with each of these policy areas. The Rural Ottawa paper is well developed and addresses the key issues. However, it should more strongly emphasize the essential role of rural Ottawa as the major provider of ecological services to the city as a whole. For example, the forests, wetlands and greenspaces of rural Ottawa carry the bulk of the city's carbon sequestration load, a climate change mitigation measure from which all residents benefit. Rural Ottawa is also our best hope for improving regional food security, a critical piece in a sustainable future. The arrows flowing back from the Rural Ottawa paper to the Health/Liveability box represent the benefit flow from these ecological services and from food security.

The Housing discussion paper was prepared from a social policy perspective and covers all of the relevant issues. It is in our view a subset of the overall housing challenge, which needs to be addressed through the growth management policy and the built form. There are no discussion papers on either of

these key elements. The long right arrow back to Health/Liveability illustrates the fundamental contribution of adequate housing to public health and liveability for all.

As noted above, the Economy paper needs to be reoriented towards challenges and opportunities germane to the City of Ottawa at this time. These include the economic costs and opportunities of the climate emergency, the significant economic development opportunities in the transition to a low carbon economy, the local economic revitalization made possible by adopting a multi-polar, compact, integrated built form. These steps are the economic engines needed to deliver on the ultimate expected outcome of a healthy, liveable and sustainable city for all.