

Expectations regarding policy directions in relation to the Growth Management Big Move in Ottawa's New Official Plan

When launching the consultation on strategic policy directions for the new Official Plan, the City of Ottawa set out what they called 5 Big Moves. One of the Big Moves concerned Growth Management and read as follows:

The majority of projected population growth will be accommodated through intensification rather than urban expansion

Now, over a year later, here are the policy directions we expect to see in the preliminary draft of the new Official Plan, which is expected to be released on November 20, 2020.

1. Minimize the scale of any urban expansion

Despite the City decision in May to expand the urban boundary, the exact quantum of such an expansion has been left open ended. A policy commitment has been made to exclude parcels located in agricultural resource areas from being candidates for expansion. An analysis is now being conducted to determine how much land remains as potential expansion areas. This on its own may not fulfill the approved expansion land area target. In addition, many parcels in this remaining area may not meet the minimum threshold for inclusion as expansion lands due to their distance from transit and infrastructure servicing. This would result in an even smaller supply of potential expansion lands.

Finally, a new proposal has been put forward by Taggart/Algonquins of Ontario, which would see a complete new suburb of 35,000 built at the south eastern edge of the urban boundary. This would represent 1100 gross ha, which is about 75% of the approved expansion land target.

So there are still many unanswered questions about the exactly where and how much urban expansion will be approved. These choices provide an opportunity for minimizing the scale of urban expansion, which is still the first best climate smart approach to growth management.

Council should approve the smallest possible addition to the urban area from the available options.

2. Increase and distribute the share of growth through intensification across the city

The reduction in the scale of the urban expansion would result in a greater share of growth being accommodated through intensification. This intensification should take the form of regenerating neighbourhoods into denser, more resilient, less car-dependent communities. To foster social license and acceptance, such regeneration must be promoted everywhere in the urban area of the city. This is also the safer course to take in the context of the disruptions in transportation patterns for work, shopping and other activities experienced during the pandemic, some of which may become permanent features of urban life. The proposed transects approach has much merit from the standpoint of a wide array of policies. It should not however restrict regeneration friendly policies to only certain transects. Rather it should shape and facilitate the type of regeneration that is appropriate to the context of each transect.

Growth management policies in the OP should encourage neighbourhood regeneration across the city, in a manner that is appropriate for each transect.

3. Adopt planning and zoning policies that facilitate the regeneration of neighbourhoods into denser, more resilient, less car-dependent neighbourhoods.

a. Identify and commit to a city-wide neighbourhood fabric

All planning around neighbourhood regeneration pre-supposes the recognition and delineation of neighbourhoods across the city that are of a size and geography that accords with denser, more resilient and less car-dependent communities, or so-called 15-minute neighbourhoods. So, areas with a radius of around 1 km that have no natural or man-made barriers to mobility within. The attached maps show an attempt at delineating such areas across the city. In all, 106 such areas can be delineated across the urban area of Ottawa. Many of these correspond to well established, recognizable communities. However, many more, especially in the outlying areas, are subsets of larger suburban developments that do not have the same cohesion and identity. Regeneration of such neighbourhoods would require more inputs and policy interventions, such as those outlined below.

b. Modify road patterns and designations to create central high streets at the neighbourhood level.

Regenerated neighbourhoods need to be anchored by central thoroughfares that attract foot and active transportation traffic. These should be central to the community and preferably not arterials (which for the most part are not pedestrian- or active transportation-friendly). This would require the identification and redesignation of existing streets as neighbourhood main streets across the city.

c. Allow more commercial and institutional uses in what are currently residential areas.

To animate these central thoroughfares and provide services, gathering and socializing opportunities, strips along these neighbourhood main streets need to be zoned to permit mixed residential, commercial and institutional uses.

d. Adopt transects at the neighbourhood level to make more building types possible by right.

To provide flexibility, but with associated predictability and certainty, the transect concept should be adapted to the neighbourhood level. For example, a regenerated neighbourhood could consist of a higher density central node transect, surrounded by mid-density mixed residential transect and a lower density outer ring.

e. Abandon monoculture of dwelling types.

Adopting a policy of regenerating neighbourhoods across the city along these lines implies the end of neighbourhoods consisting solely of large tracts of identical dwelling types, typically single-detached. Rather than kilometer after kilometer of single detached homes broken up solely by islands of townhouses, travel through neighbourhoods would reveal an ever changing pattern of lower density, mixed density and higher density hubs, as if travelling through a series of urban villages, each with its own characteristics and attractions.

4. Make neighbourhoods more resilient by protecting and preserving tree canopy, accessible greenspace and permeable surfaces.

While liberalizing the planning approval regime, it is important to strengthen natural systems protections lest it all be destroyed and replaced by hardscape.

a. Tree canopy

Tree canopy cover targets must be established at the neighbourhood level, perhaps conditioned by transect. Removals and additions must be considered in relation to achieving or maintaining the canopy cover target. Enforcement is key and varies according to ownership. Trees on City lands (parks, rights of way and others) are completely under the control of the City and all removals and additions must be made with the achievement and maintenance of neighbourhood canopy cover targets in mind. Depending on the share of canopy cover supplied by trees on private land, the City might be responsible for up to 100% of the canopy cover in a given neighbourhood.

For trees on private land, in the case of new construction, enforcement could be done through planning applications. All removals and additions must be made with the achievement and maintenance of neighbourhood canopy cover targets in mind. Where canopy targets are not yet attained, or if they would be breached by the proposed construction, then designs would need to be altered to preserve distinctive trees.

For trees on private land where there is no planning application, the current permit regime for distinctive trees could continue to apply, with the attending fines. Consideration could be given however to providing tree stewardship incentives, for example a property tax benefit for the yearly retention of distinctive trees.

b. Accessible greenspace

Distance targets for access to greenspace must be established and maintained. The current non-binding target of 400m for each household could be reviewed, conditioned by transect, and made mandatory. Given distances involved, these are in effect neighbourhood level targets. By definition, accessible greenspaces are on public lands. The City is therefore on its own to provide and maintain greenspace within the target distances set out in policy. (Consideration must be given to how NCC lands should be taken into account for this purpose). Parks, parkettes, community gardens, wooded areas and meadows, inter alia, would be considered accessible greenspace. Where the supply of such public greenspace is lacking, opportunities for reclaiming public uses for public lands should be examined first. Road rights of way, entire streets and intersection designs could be converted or adapted to provide accessible greenspaces. In addition to City ownership, other land tenure could be considered such as local cooperatives or other communal resident arrangements for ownership and maintenance of accessible greenspace.

In the case of privately held greenspace, should it be necessary for achieving the accessible greenspace targets at the neighbourhood level, consideration should be given to acquisition by the City or transfer to the City where the land is subject to a planning application. This would be similar to the Significant Woodland policy but for greenspaces that do not meet the significant woodland policy threshold. It would only be invoked where there are no other options for achieving the accessible greenspace targets.

c. Permeable surfaces

Denser neighbourhoods must not lead to the loss of permeable surfaces. Resilience and flood protection are among the benefits of tree canopy and greenspace at the neighbourhood level. But consideration should also be given to permeability at the lot level. Similar to canopy cover, permeable surface targets

could be established and enforced at the neighbourhood level, conditioned by transect. Removals and additions of permeable surfaces must be considered in relation to achieving or maintaining the permeability target. Enforcement would vary according to ownership. Permeable surfaces on City lands are completely under the control of the City and all removals and additions must be made with the achievement and maintenance of neighbourhood permeability targets in mind.

For permeable surfaces on private land, in the case of new construction, enforcement could be done through planning applications. All removals and additions must be made with the achievement and maintenance of neighbourhood permeability targets in mind. Where targets are not yet attained, or if they would be breached by the proposed construction, then designs would need to be altered to preserve permeable surfaces.

For permeable surfaces on private land where there is no planning application, a regime of permits and fines could be considered but perhaps permeability maintenance incentives would be more effective, for example adjustments and rebates in storm water management rates.

With these provisions in place, we could boldly move to regenerating neighbourhoods as denser, resilient and less car dependent communities (so-called 15 minute neighbourhoods) in the knowledge greenspace is not sacrificed to density and that liveability and climate action are best served.