

## Great Communities Don't Just Happen

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The village of Wellington's new development will increase its population by three to four fold within the next 20 years. Future new community-scale development will take place through multiple draft plan applications surrounding the heritage core of the village. Two of these applications have already been approved and construction has started. The need to ensure high quality development that will mesh in a compatible manner with the older village is essential. This is in order to not only maintain the great characteristics of the past but also to ensure that new development meets the needs of the present and future such as climate change, healthy and aging communities through resilient design.

The development of new communities is a process of checks and balances. Both the private sector developer and the public sector review agencies and operations contribute to the completed new community.

The **private sector** look for development opportunities that will be profitable as well as sustain their business plan, ensure corporate longevity and maintain their skilled trades over the longer term. They also need to assess long-term financing from initial land acquisition through a lengthy and complicated review and approval process while at the same time anticipating the risks involved in changing market demand, inflation, mortgage rates and actual public demand for a new home. This often entails a period of three to ten years before income from the first house sale starts to flow back in.

We were living with incredibly low interest rates and high housing demand for a very long time, but things have now changed. Smart developers plan for the long term and to coordinate with municipalities and the public. Short-term planning can result in public mistrust, huge debts and possibly even bankruptcy.

The **public sector** needs to anticipate and plan for coordinated and logical future growth by documenting land-use locations, phasing, infrastructure delivery, environmental boundaries etc through primary tools such as Official Plans (OP), Secondary Plans (SP), zoning by-laws (ZBL) and so forth. The welfare of the community is set up through a 25 year horizon in the OP and must address environmental, financial, infrastructure, socio-cultural, and built-form needs.

Larger development plans (i.e., Draft Plans, of which the County is currently reviewing ten) must be reviewed and commented on by upwards of 25 public agencies, depending on the size and location of the application, before a plan can be recommended by the Planning Department to Council for approval. These agencies can include: school boards, finance, engineering, transportation and parks, environmental, storm water review, hydro, water, gas and telecommunications agencies to name just a few. As part of this lengthy process, public consultation is mandated under the Planning Act through “Public Meetings”. Smart developers, usually encouraged by planning staff and local councillors, will hold neighbourhood open house meetings to introduce themselves and explain in an informal setting what their preliminary plans are for their site, show images of their projects and gather input before they finalize a plan or submit an application.

The informal meetings engage the current residents early on, allow necessary dialogue to begin on local issues and concerns (it is human nature to question change, to want more information, and to provide input). With the input gathered through face to face meetings an applicant’s preliminary plan can be prepared in a more comprehensive manner allowing the dialogue to continue throughout the review process.

Future residents also need to be considered. Has their new neighbourhood been well designed to serve their needs through the diversity of housing types and services they will need for ageing in the community, is it climate-change ready and resilient and is it walkable or wheelchair accessible, and compatible with the older village area? New residents should feel welcome as they will play a major role in

community life and the stewardship needed to ensure longevity of a great community.

New tools that municipalities can use, and require from builders, to deliver better quality and preparedness for the future and climate change are available. We know that substantial new development is coming to Wellington, but are the traditional primary tools--OPs, SecPlans, ZBLs—enough? There are essential urban design relationships, a finer grain of review, beyond the primary municipal elements, that are needed to address and finalize many interrelated matters before a plan is approved for construction.

Once new infrastructure and buildings are in place they represent many, many millions of private and public dollars invested. If they are not designed to properly address current and future needs now—climate change, ageing society, mobility needs, affordability, etc—they will not be changed for a generation. The money is simply not available to go back and rebuild new infrastructure and homes, and retrofits always cost much more and generally don't work as well. And in dealing with being ready for climate change, we just do not have the time to waste.

These are just two examples amongst many urban design relationships that can address current and future needs:

- Streetscape design that permits multiple mobility routes for cars, bikes and pedestrians through adequate traffic calming, road widths, sidewalks, bike trails, street planting to reduce heat-island effect, and building placement so that doors and windows face the street and not car bumpers and blank garage doors. This example encourages walkability and physical health, reduces car dependence, and heat-island effect while assisting climate change reduction goals. It also provide what Jane Jacobs called “eyes on the street” for public safety and involvement.
- Distance from your front door to get somewhere will determine whether you can walk, or you will have to drive, how many cars your household will need, and the experience you have getting there. Does the community plan allow

you to walk to a small park or natural feature within two minutes? This is essential for seniors, children, and early morning dog walkers. Can you get to a larger neighbourhood park, shops, services, schools, bus stop, within a five to ten minute walk? This is important for school kids, seniors, people with mobility issues, and people wanting to get to shops, services and restaurants. Distance relationships are an important tool with which to evaluate the merits of any new plan.

These examples may sound alien to some as a rural community, but Wellington will not be small rural community in the coming years. With 6-8,000 residents it could face many of the same problems older suburban communities face (such as having to use a car to get anywhere), unless finer grain design considerations are applied now before the full building program is underway.

**New tools** are available for municipalities to use in the evaluation and guidance of new plans. Again this a means of finding a balance between private builders and public agencies in arriving at sustainable long term growth, When I searched the County municipal website I did not see the following documents required as part of plan review (they may be being worked on or to be used as part of an amendment for inclusion in the future):

**Urban Design Guidelines (UDG):** this document sets out the relationships mentioned above , and many more, through text and illustrations. It addresses in detail the actual form and relationships of buildings, streets, parks and so forth. It does not deal with detailed building architecture but more with location, car/garage placement, ensuring that parks are open, visible and accessible and not blocked by buildings and other barriers. UDG can be prepared as a master document by the municipality to be used by a private builder for the urban plan preparation for their own sites. The UDG is reviewed and approved by the municipality and used in the review of new applications for conformity and before approval. This is the document that can determine the difference between outdated suburban “business as usual”

and responsible design that is aesthetically engaging as well as suitable for future needs.

**Climate Change Strategy and Guidelines:** a climate change emergency was declared by the municipality some years ago. A climate change strategy and guidelines can go a long way in delivering this declaration and making it meaningful and not just words. Climate change strategies set out policies, a local rationale and specific measures and milestones for a municipality to meet in achieving their targets. Climate change guidelines (CGs) set out both aspirational as well as mandatory requirements that new and redevelopment needs to achieve during plan review and prior to approval. As the need to address climate change is a transition from present day conventional development to more sustainable building and infrastructure forms, some of the initial aspirational targets will become mandatory within a short period. CGs are in some instances include in Urban Design Guidelines to create one comprehensive document for development and review.

**Architectural Controls (AC):** Architectural controls are prepared by a control architect to guide architectural and design elements and materials to ensure compatible building throughout a community. ACs are reviewed and approved by the municipality and administered by an approved control architect. The control architect's role is approved by the municipality and in some cases may be paid for by the builder. It is a third party role removed from the builder and the AC must approve building plans before the municipality will issue a building permit. Many developers voluntarily use the AC system when there are multiple builders on a site to ensure that all the different house plans will work together as one community.

These three documents are already used extensively throughout Southern Ontario. Nearby, the Town of Cobourg and the City of Kingston utilize them all or in part in reviewing new development. Most developers who work in different communities are already familiar with this process and start comprehensive plans knowing this evaluation is part of the approval process. If they are not required they are not produced.

Wellington will see unprecedented development, a tripling or more in size, over the next 15-20 years. Extensive new community and neighbourhood-scale development areas will be built in or around the present village area. We will need all the tools available and experienced municipal staff to guide well designed and sustainable development.

New development, if done well, should mesh in a compatible and resilient manner with the existing village. Good community creation requires an awful lot of work by all parties concerned, from the large policy plan right down to the level of the street and the block. A high standard of cooperation between private builders, public institutions and community input and participation throughout is needed to ensure a positive balance. Great communities don't just happen and at the same time they are never finished.