



October 18, 2012

Audrey Bennett, MCIP, RPP  
Director, Provincial Planning Policy Branch  
Ministry of Municipal Affairs & Housing  
College Park, 17th Floor  
777 Bay Street  
Toronto, ON M5G2E5

Dear Ms Bennett:

On behalf of the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI), please find attached a discussion paper in response to the issues raised by planners practicing in rural areas of the province.

The issues contained in this paper are observations only and are intended to start the discussion, rather than being firm positions. As a discussion paper containing a range of perspectives, this paper does not constitute OPPI's position on any particular topic. We hope that this discussion paper will provide useful perspectives for Ministry consideration, in particular the current Provincial Policy Statement review.

To schedule a meeting or for further information, please contact Loretta Ryan, MCIP, RPP, Director, Public Affairs at [policy@ontarioplanners.on.ca](mailto:policy@ontarioplanners.on.ca) or by phone at 416-668-8469.

Sincerely,

Scott Tousaw, MCIP, RPP  
Chair, Policy Development Committee  
Ontario Professional Planners Institute

Copy:

Ken Petersen, MCIP, RPP, Manager, Legislation and Research Section, MAH  
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## **A Discussion Paper on Rural Policy Ontario Professional Planners Institute October 18, 2012**

### **Introduction**

This discussion paper was initiated by the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) in response to the issues raised by planners practicing in rural areas of the province. OPPI consulted with its Agriculture and Rural Affairs Working Group and other rural planners to learn what planning policy issues are important to rural areas.

The purposes of this discussion paper are:

- to highlight planning policy issues faced by rural planners;
- to facilitate a discussion of rural planning issues;
- to share these ideas with rural planners and provincial counterparts; and
- to influence provincial policy development from a rural perspective.

In the short term, this discussion paper will be shared with staff of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing engaged in reviewing the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS). Over the long term, this discussion paper is intended to contribute to and continue the conversation about rural planning issues, how they may differ from planning in urbanizing regions, and what policy responses may be appropriate.

The breadth of issues raised during the consultation for this discussion paper resulted in a summary of issues in list form, rather than a full discussion of each issue. Many of these issues relate to the PPS, but some also pertain to other legislation or government policy. In many cases, the issues raised are intended as context to broad government policy making that may be useful for different ministries and organizations when considering the implications of policies and programs on rural areas of the province.

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The Ontario Professional Planners Institute is the recognized voice of the Province's planning profession. Our almost 4,000 members work in government, private practice, universities, and non-profit agencies in the fields of urban and rural development, urban design, environmental planning, transportation, health and social services, heritage conservation, housing, and economic development. Our Members have met strict practice requirements and are accountable to OPPI and the public to practice ethically and to abide by a Professional Code of Practice. Only Full Members are authorized by the Ontario Professional Planners Institute Act, 1994, to use the title "Registered Professional Planner" (or "RPP").  
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## Summary of Issues

### Background and Definition

Many people in rural Ontario perceive their communities as undergoing substantial change and in many cases this change is perceived as rural decline. A wide variety of influences combine to create this change, including demographics, economic adjustments, fiscal policy and other government policy. A primary purpose of this discussion paper is to provide background and context for the pressures facing rural communities in Ontario. It is hoped that an ongoing discussion of the issues facing rural communities will assist in the development of appropriate policies, programs and responses to the challenges. A strong desire exists in the rural communities of Ontario to not only survive, but to thrive.

In this paper, the term “rural” refers to the non-urbanizing parts of Ontario where communities comprise dispersed populations, typically based on resource economies (agriculture, forestry, mining, recreation, etc.), and includes small towns, villages and hamlets that are part of the rural fabric.

### Rural

- A discussion of rural issues oversimplifies the diversity of rural areas that exist in Ontario. Rural Ontario is not homogeneous. Communities may be near-urban and influenced by commuter sheds and the range of services available in a large centre; or urban-distant with a greater need for self-sufficiency; or exurban where a large number of former city dwellers have moved to the countryside and hamlets; or tourist based where outsiders value local scenery or historical qualities; or agricultural where farming operations dominate the landscape. Each of these types of communities, and more, require specialized considerations in planning tailored to their unique settings and needs.
- By virtue of their large expanse and resources, rural areas provide many supports to cities such as raw materials, food products, electricity generation, open space, water protection, transportation corridors, wildlife habitat, recreation and conservation. Some of these functions can impose a disproportionate cost on rural residents and municipalities. It is also acknowledged that cities provide important supports to rural areas, including higher orders of commerce, education, entertainment and health care. One cannot function well without the other.

### Planning Framework

- The current provincial planning framework often places the same requirements on all communities, regardless of their size. Matters of intensification, redevelopment, phasing, water and sewer services, settlement boundary expansions, etc. play out completely differently in rural areas as compared to larger urban centres.
- Provincial programs supporting economic development in rural areas should also promote good planning principles.
- Most rural counties oversee planning but do not have jurisdiction for water and sewage services which adds a level of complexity and uncertainty to rural planning.
- The Growth Plan envisions rural communities developing as complete communities. This goal should be operationalized by appropriate policies for all rural areas of the province.
- In some parts of Ontario, especially in the southwest, rural is typically synonymous with agriculture. In these areas, as well as in areas where agriculture does not dominate the landscape, it must be remembered that a variety of land uses co-exist in rural areas, including resource based land uses, recreational uses, natural area conservation, small-

medium sized business uses, lifestyle/housing choice uses, and transportation/utility/communication infrastructure uses.

- As much as possible, land use planning needs to recognize and account for the socio-economic needs and challenges of different rural areas.
- Ontario's Rural Plan, released in 2004, should be renewed and put into action. It espoused local economic development, leadership, health care, skilled workforce, renewed infrastructure, sound planning and quality education.  
[http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/rural/rural\\_plan/downloads/rural\\_plan.pdf](http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/rural/rural_plan/downloads/rural_plan.pdf)
- Some flexibility of application of planning policies is required in rural areas (e.g., MDS, agri-tourism, diversification, farm intensification).

#### Slow / No Growth / Decline

- Many rural communities in Ontario are experiencing slow or no growth, and some are experiencing population decline.
- Population decline related to economic activity is exacerbated by population demographics – fewer families having fewer children – and the lack of immigrants settling outside metropolitan areas. These combined factors result in the closure of rural institutions like schools and churches, the very expression of rural communities.
- The planning needs in these communities are markedly different from the needs of growing communities.
- Policy approaches that are appropriate in growing areas may be perceived as unnecessary or even irrelevant in areas of decline.
- The political appetite for planning is different in no growth or declining areas, where planning must be seen as facilitating opportunity rather than regulatory barriers.
- The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe does not adequately address areas within its jurisdiction that are not experiencing growth.
- The Growth Plan does not recognize that some rural jurisdictions have large geographic areas with individual communities that have different markets depending on their location. The land budget and complete community requirements of the Plan work well in urban areas but are problematic to implement in rural communities. Similar issues arise when applying the PPS comprehensive review requirements in rural areas.
- In prime agricultural areas, there seems to be a connection to population decline, and the perception by some that an element of the change is connected to planning policy (recognizing the over-riding factors of farm consolidation and demographic changes). Efforts to counteract decline should be considered while still advancing good planning principles.

#### Greater Attention to Rural Areas

- There are many initiatives affecting certain parts of the province, such as the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, or the Northern Growth Plan, but there isn't necessarily a similar focus on rural areas.
- There is a desire to see increased responsiveness to rural concerns, including the flexibility to implement the PPS and other planning frameworks differently in different circumstances.
- There is a need for ensuring appropriate rural policy that meets local and provincial objectives.
- The development of a renewed provincial vision for rural Ontario is warranted.

## A Rural Lens

- Senior governments should vet proposed policies and programs through a rural lens to ensure they will be implementable and achieve the desired result in rural areas.
- The Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) launched the Northern and Rural Lens at its 2012 conference, including a checklist of considerations to screen proposed government initiatives for their suitability, accessibility and feasibility in rural areas. [http://www.amo.on.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=What\\_s\\_New8&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=164524](http://www.amo.on.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=What_s_New8&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=164524)
- Some jurisdictions, such as England, have an office of rural advocacy whose job it is to understand and communicate rural issues to government. Canada has the Rural Secretariat with a mandate to ensure rural considerations in federal government policies and programs.
- Reactionary rural attitudes surface when rural people have reason to believe that their urban counterparts misunderstand or undervalue rural concerns. A rural lens can help prevent or alleviate these reactions.
- Some Ontario planning authorities use a lens to ensure adequate communication to vulnerable populations, including rural residents (e.g., Ottawa's equity and inclusion lens).

## Economic Diversity

- Rural areas, with or without agriculture activity, are not based solely on resource-based recreation and resource extraction. Many communities have a long history of economic activity which includes places to live, small-scale farming, artisans, small manufacturing, home-based businesses, consultants, commerce, education, and more.
- A planning framework is needed that is consistent with rural economies and fosters rural economic pursuits.
- Communities are at risk where old economic drivers are declining and not being replaced.
- Without a greater understanding of the functioning of rural economies, local communities and the municipalities they comprise may not be sustainable.
- Small business is the foundation of rural economies and should be supported (e.g., value-added enterprises, rural tourism, and the shift towards local food creates many opportunities for production, processing, retailing, etc.).
- There are many opportunities for working and living in rural areas, facilitated where possible by appropriate government policy.
- In agricultural areas, farmland is protected but farm families are not. The ongoing consolidation within the industry continues to shed jobs and underpin perceptions of rural decline.
- Small scale farming and hobby farms should not be underestimated for their economic contribution and production output. These operations often make a living on lower quality agricultural land and their management practices often foster biodiversity and conservation.
- Rural economies should benefit from government policies designed to reduce regulations on business, support R&D, and enhance exports.
- It is argued by some that the increasing societal importance placed on water quality protection and natural areas preservation should result in some form of compensation to landowners who implement proper management practices (e.g., limited payments for ecological goods and services have been piloted in certain agricultural areas).

## Rural Amenities

- Many people desire to return to smaller communities and rural areas in pursuit of a different or healthier lifestyle, access to natural areas and other amenities, or returning to their roots. These people pursue or create opportunities that allow them to earn a living in rural areas. Facilitating these newcomers or returnees can bolster local economies and does not necessarily result in increased commuters to larger urban centres.
- Rural residential development, whether dispersed throughout the countryside (in non-agricultural areas) or in small hamlets, offers affordable housing opportunities to people who may not be able to afford to live in larger communities. A large proportion of rural residential dwellings are modest, especially beyond the commuter shed of large centres, and are occupied by local people who are integrated with the local economy.

## Infrastructure

- The financial constraints of small communities require the attention of funders with programs for affordable housing, infrastructure, and community facilities.
- Alternative solutions to infrastructure are often required in rural areas due to physical constraints, including bedrock outcrops, wetlands, and limited road networks.

## Intensification

- Small settlements in rural areas often exemplify the benefits and enjoyment of walkable communities. Their human scale and relatively low density are part of their charm. While some opportunities for sensitive intensification and infill exist, community character should not be compromised by a singular focus on containing settlement boundaries through intensification.
- Land required for new housing to meet the needs of retirees and seniors may be difficult to justify using land budget formulae where slow or no growth has been the norm.

## Communities of Interest

- Counties, local municipalities, school boards and health care providers, among others, have undergone amalgamation and restructuring in recent decades, but historical boundaries have usually remained the same. Municipalities that are not composed of communities of interest with common economic and social ties are at risk of being unsustainable.

## Conclusion

The rural areas of Ontario make important contributions to the society, economy and environment of the province. As rural communities undergo change, they require a supportive and creative policy environment within which to plan, implement and thrive.

This discussion paper is intended to continue the conversation about the planning issues of importance to rural areas, and to provide a rural lens for the consideration of provincial officials and others as they consider policy frameworks that affect rural communities.

Questions to consider include: How should the various interests and issues be addressed at the community, regional and provincial levels? How can a holistic view of rural areas be fostered that connects diverse ideas in land use, economic, social, environmental and fiscal policy? To what degree might community sustainability planning assist with addressing these issues?

Please join the conversation in our collective pursuit of a healthy Ontario.