



Ryan Mounsey, RPP, has a deep understanding of the local start-up ecosystem, the housing market, and the importance of talent attraction and economic diversification in the Region of Waterloo.

Registered Professional Planner

PROFILE

NAME:

Ryan Mounsey, RPP

LOCATION:

Kitchener, Ontario

POSITION:

Supervisor of Economic Development, Region of Waterloo

AS OF SEPTEMBER 16, 2021,

Manager of Affordable Housing Development, Region of Waterloo*

*Shortly after this interview was completed, Ryan Mounsey accepted a new position at the Region of Waterloo: Manager of Affordable Housing Development.

"Following a near decade run in economic development, I am focusing my attention on a very important issue impacting all."

With an undergraduate degree in urban planning from the University of Waterloo and a master's degree in urban design from the University of Toronto, Mounsey launched his career in planning and land development over 20 years ago, with experience gained in consulting and three municipal governments. During the past eight years, he has focused on economic development with an emphasis on investment attraction, quality of life, and the economic competitiveness of being located on the Toronto-Waterloo Innovation Corridor.

As Supervisor of Economic Development for the Region of Waterloo, a position he has held for the last two years, his key projects include the land disposition process for the former bus station site in downtown Kitchener, working on affordable housing land options, developing an aviation and aerospace strategy, managing a provincial job sites submission, and contributing to other regional initiatives with a data focus and the Moody's credit rating process.

Mounsey is also a former OPPI course instructor in urban design and is currently writing a book on city building and attraction.

What are some of the key factors that have contributed to the Region of Waterloo becoming a top start-up ecosystem?

Having a clear vision of what our (community) strength is and collaboration with others to support and deliver that vision. Our start-up ecosystem is based in our post-secondary institutions who deliver the talent – along with their own start-up and business programs – and are great community partners. As well, we have Communtech, a leading advocate for our tech community, and the role of complementary public sector initiatives that are focused on advancing a start-up city culture.

Our start-up city "movement" started over 10 years ago based on an entrepreneurial legacy and partnerships and has advanced into its own community that attracts talent and investment into our region. New ideas and incubator programs continue to grow with focus on solving global problems. Our region is well positioned to grow based on its location near a global city, investment in light rail transit (LRT) to enhance local quality of life and intensification, and a growing business community that values an urban-rural lifestyle. The start-up ecosystem is accelerating through the collaboration with the Toronto-Waterloo Innovation Corridor (thecorridor.ca) and proactive growth management strategies that promote greater housing choice and amenities within our community.

How do demographics fit into your region as a fast-growing start-up ecosystem? Who is living there / moving there and why?

Demographics is everything – this is your current market, your future market, and potentially, a declining market. Our region is young – younger than the provincial average – and has three post-secondary institutions and over 150 research institutes that help attract companies looking for talent. Our region was also very fortunate to have our ION LRT project overlap with a new era of intensification projects with a growing start-up economy. This synergy is what connects to the start-up ecosystem.

Good planning provides a foundation to attract business and talent to a community. The timing of new housing projects with new amenities and transit fit perfectly with the growing millennial and upcoming Z generations who can choose to live almost anywhere. Demographics is helping the start-up ecosystem grow, knowing new investments are being made in amenity spaces and transportation critical to attract talent. Our population growth is being enhanced by migration trends and a growing economy that requires thoughtful planning to accommodate our next phase of city building.

Tell us about transportation and the role the ION LRT has in supporting your region.

Significant transportation investment is critical in both enabling growth management policies and attracting investment opportunities. The ION LRT is confirmation that you can support reduced parking requirements for new development, as well as attract talent to your community who want to live near amenities of choice.

During the last three years, the region has been ranked as one of the fastest growing CMAs in Canada (1st or 2nd) and has generated over \$1B construction values in 2019 (\$1.7B) and 2020 (\$1.6) with over 65 per cent of all housing units built within the urban built boundary (73 per cent in 2019 and 55 per cent in 2020). The Stage 1 ION LRT is proving to show positive results and provides a business case for the Stage 2 LRT extension. As cities grow, new transportation solutions will be required, including continuous investment in active transportation options, creative city-building projects, and perhaps, more work from home and “Future of Work” solutions.

How does technology and “being connected” fit in?

Moore’s Law states technology doubles every 18 to 24 months. This helps explain the rise of start-up companies, as well as transformative changes in our retailing (distribution centres and ‘AI’ tools), transportation (with emerging last mile options), and social engagement, to name a few. Smart city technology solutions will become more important as we grow and as we all become more digitally connected. The bottom line is that technology is having a greater role in our life, and in turn, drives investment decisions on how quickly you respond. This is an area we are all learning and will have to deliver more quickly.

Where should planners who want to attract start-ups to their areas be focusing their attention?

A few ideas here. One, determine what your community strengths are and how you can leverage those. There must be a reason to have a start-up culture and a path to leverage this.

The next idea is intertwined: what can you do to attract or grow incubator programs and small companies (e.g., CIP program for small offices or partnerships)? What zoning is appropriate to attract new companies (lower parking requirements go a long way for start-ups, flexible zoning for diverse activities and amenities such as restaurants) and housing choices? Over time, cultural amenities, transportation, and housing will be important to retain and, more importantly, attract new companies and talent to your community. Housing options will remain a top issue.

Time is one of the most important lessons. Space will be needed now, not in 18 months. Recall that Moore’s Law will accelerate a new breed (or set) of companies by then, or companies may be tripling their workforce by then. Having the ability to meet timelines will be critical in supporting company growth and housing demand.

What makes you most proud of being an RPP and, particularly, an RPP in your region?

The ability to make a difference. This profession is about change and having an ability to support positive change and, of course, being aware of your role in the process. I have been fortunate to be involved in some very large-scale and transformative projects in our region. These have included the School of Pharmacy project, the Centre for International Governance and Innovation, Barrel Yards and The Boardwalk. I am very happy about how they have turned out.

I have also been involved in a series of other projects, smaller and policy projects, such as Arrow Lofts, The 42 condo project, Sage projects, the pending sale of The ARC property, the Kitchener neighbourhood and mixed-use corridor guidelines, The City of Waterloo and Blackberry campus guidelines. These have opened some doors, introduced some new thinking, and allowed other planners to advance their ideas, such as new design guidelines.

The planning experience has proven itself very valuable in economic development, knowing both fields have similar goals but are delivered in a different context. Planning allows you to make a difference in a variety of fields. I am also a periodic OPPI publication and conference contributor, and I am proud of this work.

Do you have a message for your fellow RPPs and future RPPs?

Urban planning is more important than ever, and there will be a role for you to make a difference, knowing that it may take some time. Have an idea of where you want to be and find where you can make the biggest difference. Know that, in turn, this may take you in a new direction(s). There will be some very interesting people, projects, and experiences along the journey! 🙌