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Strengthening Ontario's Planning Framework: Recommendations for a Resilient Future



Informing Choices. Inspiring Communities.

Introduction

The Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) has developed a comprehensive set of recommendations to enhance Ontario's planning system. As Ontario faces unprecedented challenges in housing, infrastructure, and sustainable growth, these proposals aim to streamline processes, promote flexibility, and bolster capacity. With a focus on timely approvals, flexible policies, improved transparency, and capacity building, OPPI's recommendations address critical gaps and inefficiencies. By fostering collaboration between municipalities, planners, and provincial entities, these strategies envision a planning system that is transparent, adaptable, and equipped to meet Ontario's evolving needs.





#1 Timely & Focused Development Approvals

A) Delegation of Technical Approvals

The Province should further enhance delegation of minor planning approvals that primarily serve to implement Council-approved policies and plans.

- In recent years, Ontario expanded the ability of municipal councils to delegate minor planning approvals and made Site Plan Approval a mandatory delegation to planning staff who are trained professionals capable of handling this authority. These are steps in the right direction to accelerate the development approvals process.
- There are additional technical matters that should be mandatory delegations to planning staff who have the technical experience and expertise to review these matters. These include Draft Plan of Subdivisions, Lifting of Holding Provisions and Part Lot Control, Consents within urban residential land, and Validation Certificates. In situations where a Community Planning Permit System does not exist, Minor Variances should also become a delegated authority for planning staff.
- These changes will not only depoliticize technical planning approvals but also speed up processing time by removing the need to wait for Committee or Council meetings and preparing unnecessary reports. A survey conducted by OPPI in 2020 found that where delegations were in place, 63% of heads of planning departments reported a reduction in development approval timeline of 2-3 months and 11% reported a reduction of 4-5 months.

B) Community Planning Permit System

The Province should encourage the use of [Community Planning Permit Systems \(CPPS\)](#) by providing implementation funding to municipalities.

- A CPPS is an existing Planning Act tool that combines Zoning By-Law Amendment, Site Plan and Minor Variance into a single streamlined application and approval process. Once implemented, the process can significantly speed up the approval process.
- Interest in this streamlined and efficient system is growing across Ontario municipalities with the Town of Huntsville and the Town of Innisfil having implemented it, and the City of Hamilton and the City of Burlington currently in the process of implementing the tool.
- As an incentive to drive uptake, the Province should provide financial support for start-up costs related to CPPS implementation for municipalities that demonstrate implementation costs as the barrier to proceed.
- Given the uptick in CPPS programs, the Province should take the time to work with OPPI and other aligned organizations to establish provincial standards for CPPS implementation and usage. The standards should be in alignment with height and density within the Official

C) Growth and Infrastructure Management

The Province should ensure that a coordination function between land use planning and planning for infrastructure, transit and public service facilities in situations where planning authority is removed from upper-tier municipalities remains in place.

- Bill 23 and Bill 185 include provisions to remove planning authority from Peel Region, Halton Region and York Region effective July 1, 2024. Waterloo Region, Durham Region, Niagara Region and Simcoe County will have their planning authorities removed as of a date to be proclaimed in the future.
- Removing upper-tier planning authority leaves a significant gap in essential growth management and infrastructure planning which typically see no boundary and require cross-boundary coordination of lower-tier municipalities. If removed from the upper-tier municipality, this function would need to be replicated by another entity (i.e., MMAH, municipal services corporation) and assessed on a regular basis to identify challenges (e.g., coordination, implementation timeline, etc.) and improvements needed.
- In addition, the Province should assess the impact of these changes in the three Regions where planning authority has been removed prior to proclaiming the provision for the remaining four upper-tiers to better mitigate risks, challenges and timeline. Any further changes to upper-tier planning should not be undertaken without thoughtful and timely consultation and engagement with the affected upper and lower tier municipalities.

D) Concurrent Applications

The Province should promote concurrent review of applications and create enabling policies that support concurrent review, where applicable.

- Bill 109 requirements for application fee refunds tied to processing timelines created a disincentive for concurrent review of applications by municipalities. With those provisions now reversed, the Province can encourage more concurrent review of applications instead of a less efficient sequential approach.
- One policy change that would enable further concurrent review of applications is zoning approval with conditions, a measure that would allow applications to proceed to the next stage while some technical matters might be outstanding. The authority currently exists in the *Planning Act (Section V, 34.1-16)* but the Province has yet to create a regulatory framework to implement this provision.

- Zoning approval with conditions would facilitate quicker approvals by enabling municipalities to approve zoning with any necessary conditions for matters that are still in process rather than delaying approvals (e.g., completion of a study). This would allow studies to be done closer to the time that the property is slated for development and avoid repetition of studies in situations where original studies become outdated because the development was delayed.

E) Stability in the Planning System

The Province should provide a period of policy stability to allow municipalities to adapt to the new regime and ensure alignment and downstream implementation of provincial policy.

- Policy and legislative changes are necessary for a responsive and implementable planning framework / system. However, frequent provincial reviews and changes to plans and policies are likely to create barriers to new housing development. Further compounded by the shortage of planners, Municipal capacity to adapt often lags with ongoing changes to provincial plans and uncertainty in the timeline and expectations.
- For example, the Province amended the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe in 2017 and provided municipalities with five years to come into conformity. However, in addition to other legislative changes, the Province made further amendments in 2019 and then again in 2020 before municipalities had a chance to conform to the preceding changes. This further delayed the process as many municipalities had to redo significant planning work.
- Beyond municipalities, an iterative policy process presents challenges for home builders as uncertainty in the near-term policy regime adds risk to business decisions and project economics.



#2 Promoting Flexible Policies

A) Permissive Official Plans

The Province should collaborate with municipalities to promote more flexible Official Plans that are forward-thinking and create the policy enablement to support future growth.

- Some local Official Plans reflect a very specific snapshot of time, creating situations where many projects require an Official Plan Amendment to proceed. This situation adds more time to the process, generates more work for already resource-constrained planning staff, and results in unnecessary friction between applicants and reviewers.
- The structures of Officials Plans also vary across municipalities. Some include overly restrictive policies that often result in the need for project-specific amendments, while others are kept at a relatively higher level. The Province should encourage Official Plans to provide policy that directs desired community goals as opposed to outlining specific details that may be better suited for zoning by-laws and can become out-of-date relatively soon.
- The Province should investigate how the need for Official Plan amendments can be reduced and share best practices from across the municipal sector. MMAH's Regional Offices and/or the approval authority should encourage municipalities to engage with them earlier in the Official Plan development process.

B) As-of-Right Zoning

The Province should expand the Bill 23 requirement to update zoning with minimum heights and densities in Major Transit Station Areas (MTSAs) to all Strategic Growth Areas (SGAs).

- More flexible Official Plans can be helpful; however, they are not as helpful if older and more restrictive zoning by-laws that do not conform to Official Plans remain in place.
- Bill 23 introduced a requirement to update zoning to include minimum heights and densities in approved MTSAs within one year of approval. This concept should be expanded to include all SGAs and when required based on demonstrated need, financial support should be provided to municipalities to conduct this work.
- In addition, the Province should commit to a timeframe for reviewing municipal Official Plans. The City of Toronto's MTSA/PMTSA Official Plan Amendments (OPAs) have been with the Province for over two years. Delays in provincial approval of OPAs further delay the ability of municipalities to update zoning.



#3 Improving Data & Transparency

A) Provincial Repository

The Province should create a central repository for provincial and municipal planning-related data to support more evidence-based decision making and provide third parties with inputs to support further research and analysis.

- Creating a publicly available centralized repository with disaggregated data will benefit all stakeholders. Truly open data promotes innovation and creates economic value through the development of better products that can support more evidence-based planning and decision making.
- For example, as zoning is being digitized, more products are being offered to municipalities, home builders, housing advocates, and other stakeholders that add value to internal decision making.
- Municipalities, relevant provincial ministries and other agencies should be mandated to submit fully disaggregated data into this central repository on a prescribed basis, whether that be annually or some other pre-determined frequency.
- The Province can leverage its Open Data Catalogue to host the datasets and continue to build on its open data directives for each Ministry to engage with stakeholders on how access and quality of data can be improved.

B) Data Collection Support

The Province should minimize burden on municipalities by providing dedicated funding to meet the collection and reporting obligations and prevent unnecessary duplication.

- Many municipal planning departments have significant capacity challenges, whether they be financial or human resources. This is particularly true in smaller municipalities. OPPI has recommended several measures to help address the shortage of planners in Ontario. To ensure additional resources can be retained to support the data collection and reporting requirements, the Province should provide dedicated funding to support municipal implementation.
- The Province can also look to reduce burden by removing aspects of the reporting requirements where the data already exists within a provincial entity. For example, provincially initiated Minister's Zoning Orders can be reported by the MMAH as it already has the relevant information supporting those Orders.



#4 Creating a Chief Planner of Ontario

A) Chief Planner of Ontario

The Province should create a Chief Planner of Ontario (CPO) as an independent, non-political officer responsible for providing oversight of Ontario's planning system with the goal of providing greater transparency and accountability.

- The CPO would report to the Minister of Municipal Affairs & Housing and be responsible for monitoring, public reporting, technical review and proposing policy recommendations to ensure Ontario's planning system operates in an efficient and sustainable manner.
- The CPO would publish an annual "State of the Ontario's Planning System" report with an overview of the current policy regime and its implementation across various entities involved in the planning process in Ontario. This annual report would include data and evidence to support policy and/or operational recommendations to improve the system. The report would be released in a public setting with a press conference that includes a briefing and media availability for the CPO to answer questions.
- The CPO would have a robust engagement and facilitation function that solicits input from the municipal sector, Indigenous peoples, development sector, other key stakeholders and the broader public on the state of local planning as well as policy and process recommendations.
- The CPO would liaise with the federal government to ensure alignment between policy pressures imposed by federal funding programs and provincial planning policy.
- Through a Letter of Direction from the Minister, the CPO could lead stakeholder consultation and implementation of special policy projects such as standardization of zoning by-laws.
- The CPO should be a Registered Professional Planner with broad experience with Ontario's planning system in addition to having complementary skills associated with facilitation and engagement



#5 Capacity Building

A) Shortage of Planners

The Province should partner with the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) to create a comprehensive strategy to help address the shortage of planners in Ontario, similar to recent efforts to address the skilled trades shortage.

- Ontario faces a significant shortage of planners necessary to do long-range planning and process the volume of applications required to meet our housing goals. Municipalities and private consulting firms simply do not have the planning capacity to do the work that must be done.
- OPPI has developed a holistic package of recommendations that include measures to raise awareness of planning among students in high school, increase positions in post-secondary planning programs, and reduce barriers faced by mid-career professionals and internationally trained planners from securing employment as planners in Ontario. The Province should partner with OPPI to support the recommendations in principle and, where appropriate, through funding and program support.
- In addition, the Province could facilitate pooling of planning resources between high-capacity and low-capacity municipalities. This could include moving to a more systemic shared resource model facilitated by MMAH's Municipal Services Division. Regional Offices can also incorporate an increased technical support role for low-capacity municipalities by leveraging expertise in other ministries such as the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation & Parks, Ministry of Natural Resources, etc.

B) Training On Provincial Policy Changes

The Province should partner with OPPI to provide technical briefings and ongoing training on all recent and new provincial changes that impact planning in Ontario, including recent *Planning Act* changes and the consolidation of A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and the Provincial Policy Statement into the new Provincial Planning Statement.

- Considering the potential impact of such a drastically different policy document in the new PPS, and in light of the pace and scale of planning changes over the last several years, planners need a comprehensive understanding of how the changes work within the existing planning framework and system and how best to implement them.
- New provincial policies and plans often slow down the planning system as municipalities and other entities seek to understand the new changes and how to best operationalize them in their local context.
- As the association representing Registered Professional Planners in Ontario, OPPI is well suited to partner with the Province to provide these briefings and training sessions and has the depth of experience and expertise within our membership to provide a lead role in supporting MMAH in timely and responsive training and education.

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