

Backgrounder – York Region Council Staff Report Recommending Development in the Protected Greenbelt

York Regional Council is considering a staff report recommending that:

1. Council reiterate its request to the Province to develop a process allowing municipalities to access strategically located employment lands in the Greenbelt, if deemed necessary through a Municipal Comprehensive Review.
2. Council reiterate its request to the Province to permit the extension of Great Lake based servicing (water and sewage lines) as an option to service settlement areas within the Greenbelt Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Plan areas.
3. The Regional Clerk forward this report to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and to the Clerks of the local municipalities.

The decision must ultimately be made by the provincial government whether to allow removal of these lands from the Greenbelt Plan area, which it has repeatedly committed to protecting “in perpetuity”.

The Region cannot move forward unilaterally without provincial approval.

Key Issues

The Province has been 100 per cent clear on its commitment to protecting the Greenbelt

These requests are contrary to that commitment to protect the Greenbelt’s farmland and natural systems:

- Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing said, in a letter dated August 28, 2020 to the Greenbelt Council responding to concerns about the issuance of Minister’s Zoning Orders: “To be clear, I am not considering any MZO requests that impact our commitment to protect the Greenbelt.”
- Minister Clark said, in his [address](#) to the Association of Ontario Municipalities on August 20, 2020: “To be clear, I am not considering any MZO requests that impact our commitment to protect the Greenbelt.”
- Province indicated [in releasing the Provincial Policy Statement on February 28, 2020](#), that in order to protecting the environment and public safety, the Policy would “enhance stormwater management and climate change policies while continuing to protect important natural features like wetlands, wildlife habitat and the Greenbelt.”
- Minister Clark issued a [letter](#) about *A Place to Grow*, Ontario’s Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, to heads of municipal councils on February 6, 2020, which said: “This new Plan will help manage growth so communities in the region can develop in ways that expand economic opportunities, build more housing, attract investments and create jobs all while maintaining protections for our cultural heritage assets, key employment and agricultural lands and environmentally sensitive areas, including the Greenbelt.”

- Minister Clark [said](#), on September 9, 2019, while rejecting a proposal to remove a specific parcel of land from the Greenbelt: "My commitment to protecting the Greenbelt has not changed."
- Premier Ford was clear on January 28, 2019, in [announcing](#) that the government was withdrawing Schedule 10 of Bill 66: "Of course – I want to emphasize this – we would never approve any projects at the expense of the Greenbelt.... It just wouldn't happen."
- The government confirmed that "The Ontario government is committed to protecting the Greenbelt for future generations" on November 28, 2018, while [announcing](#) its *Made in Ontario Environment Plan*.

There is already more than enough land designated for employment in York Region

A York Region [report](#) in May 2019 (slide 1) indicates that almost 2,600 hectares of employment land were vacant as of 2017. The March, 2018 [York Region 2017 Vacant Employment Land Inventory](#) confirms this number (p. 14), noting as well that "33 per cent of York Region employment lands are vacant" (p. 5) and "The supply of vacant employment lands remains healthy and needs to be protected (p. 4). The report does not mention extending into the Greenbelt.

The same reports identifies that "employment land absorption in recent years has been lower than the historical average" (p. 6), with "approximately 283 net hectares of vacant employment lands...absorbed in York Region between 2013 and 2017, representing an average annual absorption rate of 71 net hectares" (p. 4). Moreover, 108 hectares were converted to non-employment uses over the same period (p. 6).

The same report also highlights that much of the existing designated employment lands are ready to be developed (pp. 4-5):

- 41 per cent of vacant employment lands contain an active plan of subdivision or site plan.
- 47 per cent or 1,228 net hectares of the total vacant supply have full regional and local servicing infrastructure in place to support development. However, half of these lands (616 of 1,228 net ha) require additional servicing capacity to support full buildout.
- A further 39 per cent (1,003 net ha) of the vacant inventory have regional servicing infrastructure in place but require extension of local systems. 59 per cent (596 of 1,003 net ha) require additional servicing capacity to support full buildout.
- Approximately 22 per cent of vacant employment parcels, amounting to 1,897 net hectares, are greater than 5 hectares.
- Nearly 84 per cent of vacant employment land, amounting to over 2,183 net hectares of land, is within 5 km of a 400-series highway
- 60 per cent of vacant employment parcels amounting to approximately 928 net hectares of vacant employment land are within 500 metres of a transit stop.
- There are approximately 249 net hectares of employment land with intensification potential for additional employment uses.

The Greenbelt is Employment Land

The Greenbelt is home to 750,000 acres of some of the most productive agricultural land in Canada and a vital resource for Ontario residents during the pandemic. While Greenbelt farms are 39 per cent smaller, they produce 68 per cent more revenue per acre than the average Ontario farm. At just 6.1 per cent of Ontario's farmland, the Greenbelt accounts for 53 per cent of Ontario's fruit acreage and 11 per cent of Ontario's vegetable acreage. Moreover, 60 per cent of Ontario's food processing capacity is located in the Greenbelt's immediate vicinity.

Additionally, farmland has been disappearing in the Greater Golden Horseshoe at an alarming rate – more than 450,000 acres of farmland has been lost since 1991. Thankfully, the Greenbelt has changed the course within its boundaries, but permanent protection is essential for the long-term success of the many food and farm related businesses across the region. Farmers need the confidence their land is secure to continue to innovate and invest in their businesses.

A 2012 [report](#) revealed that a total of at least 26,047 person years (full-time equivalents) of employment are sustained by Greenbelt activities in York Region. These impacts were driven by a sales volume of \$3.5 billion, and the large volume of expenditures was credited with supporting a permanent increase in regional income of about \$1.5 billion.

The Greenbelt's protect natural features are natural infrastructure

Municipalities are increasingly realizing the importance of including natural features such as forests and wetlands in their asset management plans as natural infrastructure, which is defined by the Insurance Board of Canada as “a strategically planned and managed network of natural lands, such as forests, wetlands and other open spaces, which conserves or enhances ecosystem values and functions and provides associated benefits to human populations.”

Natural infrastructure:

- Effectively delivers essential services and reduces disaster risks from flooding, forest fires, heat waves and other climate risks
- Provides greater resiliency than grey infrastructure under future climate change scenarios
- Stops further degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity
- Provides public health benefits through added greenspace and access to nature

Moreover, natural infrastructure saves municipalities money and increases public health by supplementing expensive engineered infrastructure, and mitigates climate risks including stormwater runoff, sedimentation and pollution; inland flooding and erosion; extreme heat and drought; climate stress (mental health and well-being); and existing/degraded ecosystem services.

The Greenbelt provides ecosystem services valued at \$3.2 billion per year, with recreational activities valued at \$2.1B per year, \$224M per year in flood protection for private property and \$52M per year in carbon sequestration.

Land use for Employment is changing, and so are municipal revenues from it

A 2019 Mowat Centre [report](#) commissioned by the Region of Peel, relevant to all Greater Golden Horseshoe municipalities, asserts that:

“Like the rest of Ontario and Canada, Peel Region’s economy is in transition – there has been a shift from goods production to goods movement, and many manufacturing plants have been replaced by warehouses and distribution centres. E-commerce has reduced demand for retail spaces. The service sector continues to expand, with a particular emphasis on knowledge-based jobs. Workplaces are shrinking, and the average square footage per employee has declined significantly. At the same time, mobile work options such as telecommuting and hot-desking are becoming increasingly popular.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt accelerated these trends. The report continues:

“These trends are likely to further strain municipal revenues, as municipal revenue tools are inordinately reliant on land-based approaches to value that are becoming less relevant in the digital era. In Peel, the share of revenue from industrial property is on a downward trend, in large part due to the decline of the manufacturing sector. Growth in employment land consumption has also slowed. Furthermore, provincial growth forecasts have not been reflective of the actual pace of development, which has led to a shortfall in expected development charge revenue. Reliance on the residential property-tax base has been increasing, as non-residential property-tax revenue as a proportion of total tax-revenues declines. If these trends continue, property taxes will become increasingly unaffordable for residents in the years ahead.”

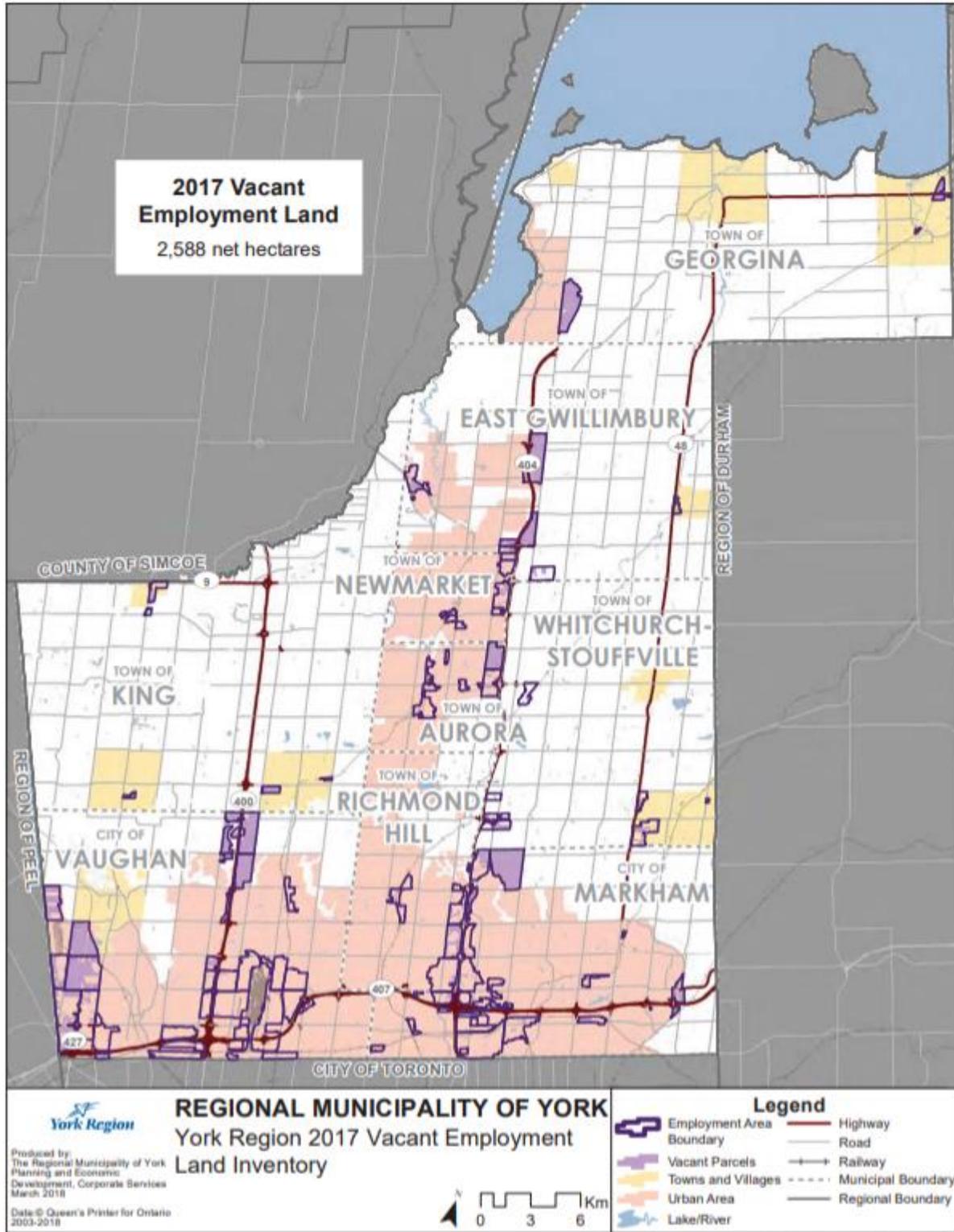
York Region’s own staff [report](#) (p.5), informed by its consultants’ research, confirms the phenomenon locally, stating that “24 per cent of the Region’s labour force being at risk of automation, with an economy increasingly focused on higher skilled activities”, although it contends that “the impacts are anticipated to be gradual, with automation likely to create more jobs in the long run” and “York Region is well positioned to withstand the impacts of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) with an economy increasingly focused on higher skilled activities.”

Great Lake based servicing undermines the Greenbelt and encourages sprawl

In the early 2000s, following the controversial decision by York Region to expand the York-Durham Sewage System, known as “The Big Pipe” in the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Greenbelt was established to direct growth towards existing urban centres and away from agricultural and natural lands. Great Lake servicing is completely contrary to this purpose.

Development and urban sprawl follow water infrastructure. Once it is in place, development requests follow, arguing investment should be maximized. For this reason, property developers are often eager to have such servicing put in place, drawing water from the Great Lakes at enormous expense to the municipality and province, on the flawed assumption that it will be paid for by development.

York Region Land Use Map



Source: <https://www.york.ca/wps/wcm/connect/yorkpublic/faa33468-b3c9-464a-9676-10be05613f20/mar+22+vacant+ex.pdf?MOD=AJPERES> (Attachment 1)