

PEEL COUNTY



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ANALYSIS

Politicians and the public need a COVID-19-type response to climate change, not a return to sprawl

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The arrival of COVID-19 shattered normality into a million pieces.

Every convention was turned on its head.

Buses now travel the streets of Peel half empty, shoppers wear masks and dining is restricted to the outdoors. Interactions with old friends and strangers start at an awkward distance, without a handshake or hug. Dating has become an entirely digital affair.



Masks are becoming a part of everyday life

Time and time again, political leaders have praised the sacrifice Ontarians have made for the province's collective safety. Premier Doug Ford has recently been on a campaign-style tour to pay tribute to the things every day citizens have given up.

There's no doubt most have stepped up, but in the background lies the knowledge of an eventual vaccine.

The vast majority of changes are temporary, meaning the government and governed can stomach them. The drastic short-term moves stand in stark contrast to continued inaction on climate change, a crisis without a vaccine. It's the one threat that demands a permanent shift in the way we live.

Some fear the close-contact spread of COVID-19 may challenge the plans for density and transit-oriented design cities had finally begun to pursue in the fight against climate change. Now, the decisive change in how we live and the emerging blueprint have been confronted by a killer virus.

Doubters are already suggesting the days of apartment living and mass transit are numbered in favour of a return to the single-family home and clogged commutes on highways.



Will these common suburban scenes continue to be the norm thanks to COVID?

Certainly, at the height of the pandemic, when people were encouraged to leave their home only for exercise, there was a significant privilege to having a garden. And, for those forced to travel long distances, a personal vehicle was more appealing than sharing the bus, subway or streetcar.

But people who argue COVID-19 will spell the end of dense planning misunderstand what it actually is. Good density is envisaged in communities of people living in buildings ranging from townhouses to apartments in cities made up of a series of 15-minute communities.

The 15-minute concept is at the heart of the City of Brampton's 2040 Vision, a document designed by B.C.-based urban planner Larry Beasley. It is the city's handbook for modernizing and preparing for the future.

In principle, a good dense community should offer everything you need within walking distance: restaurants, grocery stores, gyms and other basic amenities. Residents should largely rely on the bus, train or subway for special activities like concerts, sports

events or visiting family and friends.

Planning Act Amendments: Proposed Parkland dedication changes
Potential impact example: 770 Lawrence Avenue West (Source: City of Toronto)

Current System



Park area per Resident
3.8 m²

Bill 108



Park area per Resident
0.5 m²

Pre-pandemic, the Ford PCs pushed legislation dramatically reducing greenspace requirements around new dense development; which will just push more people to single-family homes with their own yards

A key component, to ensure true physical and psychological nourishment, is the presence of abundant greenspace that should be incorporated within each 15-minute community.

The risk posed by COVID-19 isn't a threat to density that is done well.

“Density, in a well planned circumstance, offers you many, many alternative ways to do what you need if some of those [activities] are cut back because of this pandemic or some other reason. You're not dependent on just the car for everything,” Beasley explained to The Pointer. “Crowding is different, crowding is where – and you see this in some emergency countries – where people are living in conditions where it is inevitable that they will spread the virus.”

The difference between good and bad density is community. Building two or three condo towers without transit or local businesses simply isn't good planning and calling it density is mis-selling the idea.



Investing in a new LRT system and surrounding density is a radical departure from Mississauga's sprawling past

"You almost can't just say density, you have to say density, diversity and amenity," Beasley added. "The density package by itself can be brutal, it can be as anonymous as anything else. When you add to the package diversity... and the amenity, which means that density is not oppressive, it's not crowding, it is delivered with the qualities that you need, then you have the package of success."

In recent years, Mississauga has taken a slow and careful approach to beginning to embrace this community-oriented density. Brampton has talked the talk, but is yet to demonstrate its commitment.

Like many suburban cultures across Canada, it is home to thousands of residents who simply do not buy into climate change or the individual sacrifices needed to confront the dangerous reality facing future generations.

Having one car for every member of the house, and a home that includes thousands of square feet that are seldom used, even secondary residences or year-round cottages, is a way of life for many Canadians, most of whom are older.

Mississauga, for at least four decades, has attracted many who prefer to live like this, but is trying to turn that around, even for those who can easily afford to live lifestyles that create grotesque carbon footprints, polluting the world for everyone else.

Will younger generations break away from their parents' conservative-style individualism and apathy toward our environmental future?

In the face of jaw-dropping municipal revenue losses and significant declines in transit ridership, Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie recently reaffirmed her commitment to transit-oriented communities and density built for residents. Speaking at the Canadian Urban Transit Research & Innovation Consortium (CUTRIC) conference in June, Crombie reiterated her commitment to transit, even expressing support for congestion charges and carbon pricing.

"In Mississauga, the car remains king and I have made it one of my mandates to change this," she said. "All of this is not easy to do in Mississauga and, I'll be honest, I've met with some resistance. Our mindset is still focused on the car and it's hard to see our mobility corridors as prioritizing another form of transit. Our project will retrofit suburbia, which is no easy task."

The commitment suggests Mississauga will continue its recent trend of greenlighting dense development and working to create transit. Over the next decade alone, more dense housing is expected to spring up all around Square One, Lakeview and Eglinton/Hurontario, while an LRT along Hurontario Street will complement bus priority corridors along Dundas Street and a section through the Lakeshore.

Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown submitted a video to the conference (instead of appearing live). He extolled the virtues of green transit and the need to invest, without offering new details or firm commitments.

"This crisis has provided us with a once in a generation opportunity and I don't plan on missing it," Crombie said.

The need to grasp the current opportunity is highlighted by the drastic measures COVID-19 has imposed on daily life. Faced with the threat of a disease, the vast majority of people hunkered down and accepted they had to change things in the short-term.

Almost overnight, Canada was altered.

It's an attitude neither the public nor politicians have ever been able to muster for the existential threat of climate change. Despite dire warnings from scientists about the precipice humanity is hurtling toward, most have chosen to look the other way.

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) explicitly called on local governments to help. The IPCC noted sprawling developments built around the car were one of the biggest culprits of climate change and said it was down to local municipalities to plan density for a green future.

Transportation planning, to ease the habitual sense of convenience and control that cars represent, was another point of emphasis for the IPCC report, in its focus on municipal and regional decision making. Essentially, scientists exhorted all of us to make sacrifices, individually and collectively. The excess of generations that have viewed personal wealth as a license to do whatever they want with their money, needs to be confronted. Few of them likely will, but their kids might.

The sacrifices to fight COVID offer a glimpse of what it takes to buy-in, and in parts of the world it's clear that even short-term lifestyle changes are incredibly difficult for many.

Faced with the pleas of scientists to end sprawling developments and highway commuting, the Progressive Conservative government last year restarted work on a highway scuttled in 2018 because of its environmental implications.

In development, Mississauga has begun to slowly turn the tide in issuing building permits largely for apartment buildings. In Brampton single family homes continue to abound.

Neither Brampton nor Mississauga has any time to lose in their fights against climate change. While the latter has shown progress, Peel's cities have not demonstrated urgency.

Roughly a year ago, both declared "climate emergencies", stating their intent to make the changes necessary to go green. In contrast to the immediate reaction to the state of emergencies declared for the virus, little has happened since on the green front.

And now, with density and public transit seen by many as risks in an age of viral spread, momentum away from the sprawl and hyper-carbon consumption of generations oblivious to their own destructive ways, could be stalled.

Continuing to invest in well-built density, as outlined in Brampton's 2040 Vision and some of Mississauga's recent developments, will be key to helping Peel's cities pull together on climate change, not just COVID-19. The creation of a green and electric transit fleet that regularly services all areas of the city will also be important. As part of its climate change plans, the City of Mississauga has committed to spending \$159 million on greening its fleet, while Brampton is piloting electric buses in a project funded by Ottawa.

One Milton based company, MTB Transit Solutions, is pitching an extra idea to sit alongside the purchase of new green vehicles.

"The ability for them to hit their aggressive targets [means they must] take a two pronged approach," Gara Hay, president of MTB Transit Solutions, told The Pointer. His company specializes in refurbishing buses and, in light of COVID-19 and the need for transit to go green, offers services including redesigning interior seat positioning and equipping diesel vehicles with battery capabilities.

“Continue buying new, but we can convert those old buses that still have a lot of life left in them, convert them to battery electric and try to help them hit their goals, because we don’t think just procuring all at the front end will do it.”

Around the eighth year of their service, Hay’s team comes in and strips away the seats, lights and interiors of buses to add longevity to their lives. At that point, he says, the company could also retrofit them to operate as electric.

The option plays into a clear desire to move on from COVID-19 as a greener and smarter society. Taking the vehicles cities already own and converting them will help tackle the climate crisis, while the removal of seats in the interior of buses offers a unique opportunity to make transit more comfortable than it has ever been.

If public transit can become a more efficient and convenient, less crowded, more luxurious option, younger generations, unlike their car-crazy parents, might eschew the need for their own vehicles.





Mercedes is in late-stage testing of its new electric, partially autonomous smart bus and hopes to sell them around the world

“I think the days of cramming 50 or 80 people onto a bus are over, I don’t know if that will ever happen again,” Hay added. “The transit agencies are putting a lot of thought into recognizing seat layout and how they’ll get as many people on that bus, but make it a safe environment.”

Difficult as pandemic measures have been for many in Canada, the knowledge a vaccine is likely coming has offered reassurance to many. For climate change, the answer is more complicated.

Good density and green transit are the closest panacea cities will ever have to a vaccine or a cure for climate change. Whether or not mayors and residents can apply their COVID-19 urgency to the pressing issue of human-created environmental devastation before the clock runs out remains to be seen.

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