

Our housing attitudes must change

This is the third in a series of articles examining the big environmental challenge we face in Wellington-Halton Hills and throughout Canada.

It was previously argued that one of the fundamental causes of environmental destruction in Canada is urban sprawl. In addition, the system of highways and infrastructure required to support these sprawling communities is simply not economically sustainable.

The second column argued that the solutions to urban sprawl lie in either adopting a zero population growth policy or in a significant overhaul of urban and transit planning. Since there is little appetite to reduce our population growth, the remaining solution is to overhaul urban and transit planning. This would mean ensuring that the vast majority of new population growth occurs within the existing built-up urban areas in the GTA, while committing billions from provincial and federal governments for public transit. The result would be higher populations and densities in cities like Toronto and Mississauga, an easing in the flow of commuters and goods, and in turn, an end to sprawl.

Some have suggested that an alternative to the "command-and-control approach" of urban and transit planning is to use "market forces" to achieve the same goal of halting urban sprawl. This alternative is the increasingly talked about "carbon tax", essentially a tax on fuel and energy. This carbon tax would have to be priced high enough to effect change and have an impact. Many argue that the additional tax revenues produced by a car-

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bon tax could be used to reduce personal income taxes, as well as taxes on savings and investments (i.e. capital gains taxes, dividend taxes, taxes on interest earnings, etc.). In addition to the environmental benefit of stopping sprawl, this could also produce an economic benefit. All other things being equal, productivity and wages would increase. Reducing taxes on savings and investments would lead to increased inflows into the capital markets. This means an increase in capital available for companies to invest in plant and equipment, which in turn means increases in productivity and wages.

So why haven't we moved aggressively to implement the solutions suggested above? It is in part because we live in a cultural milieu where the ideal of a two-car garage and backyard for everyone remains dominant. Everyone deserves a backyard, it is said. But having a backyard for every family and for the more than three million additional people expected to arrive in the Greater Golden Horseshoe over the next 20 years is simply not environmentally or economically compatible.

Furthermore, it would saddle future generations with the millstone of a sprawling infrastructure system they could ill afford to maintain.

We don't have a lot of land. This seems a ridiculous statement to make, until one realizes that much of Canada is inhospitable to human habitation.

Others argue that halting sprawl and creating denser communities would result in more expensive housing. This is true if one is committed to the idea that every family deserves to live in a single-detached home on a large lot. However, families can and do live comfortably in multi-storey buildings across much of Europe and Asia. A condo-townhouse along a public transit corridor costs just as much as single detached home on a larger lot. Arguably, these denser communities—a good mix of residential and commercial supported by public transit—result in a much higher quality of life.

Building more single unit, tract housing, on agricultural lands simply cannot continue. The era of building tract housing must come to an end if we are ever to tackle our environmental and economic challenges. Most importantly, it must come to an end if we are to preserve and protect the land to pass on to our children. Doing otherwise would leave them with an environmental mess and a sprawling infrastructure system they can ill afford to maintain. We can do better than leave this to future generations.

—Michael Chong is the MP for Wellington-Halton Hills and can be reached at chongm@parl.gc.ca or at 866-878 5556.

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