

No chaos looming, officials insist

'Get underneath the rhetoric,' says York Region's director of long-range planning

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

Despite the opinion of a political science professor, officials insist chaos is not lurking around the corner as York Region prepares its growth plans for the next 25 years.

"It's very easy to make blanket statements but you have to understand the system and know how we are growing," stressed John Waller, York Region's director of long-range planning.

"Get underneath the rhetoric and understand the elements we are working with, what we have and what we can improve on. In York Region, we have a very strong growth management system in place that has worked well for a number of years.

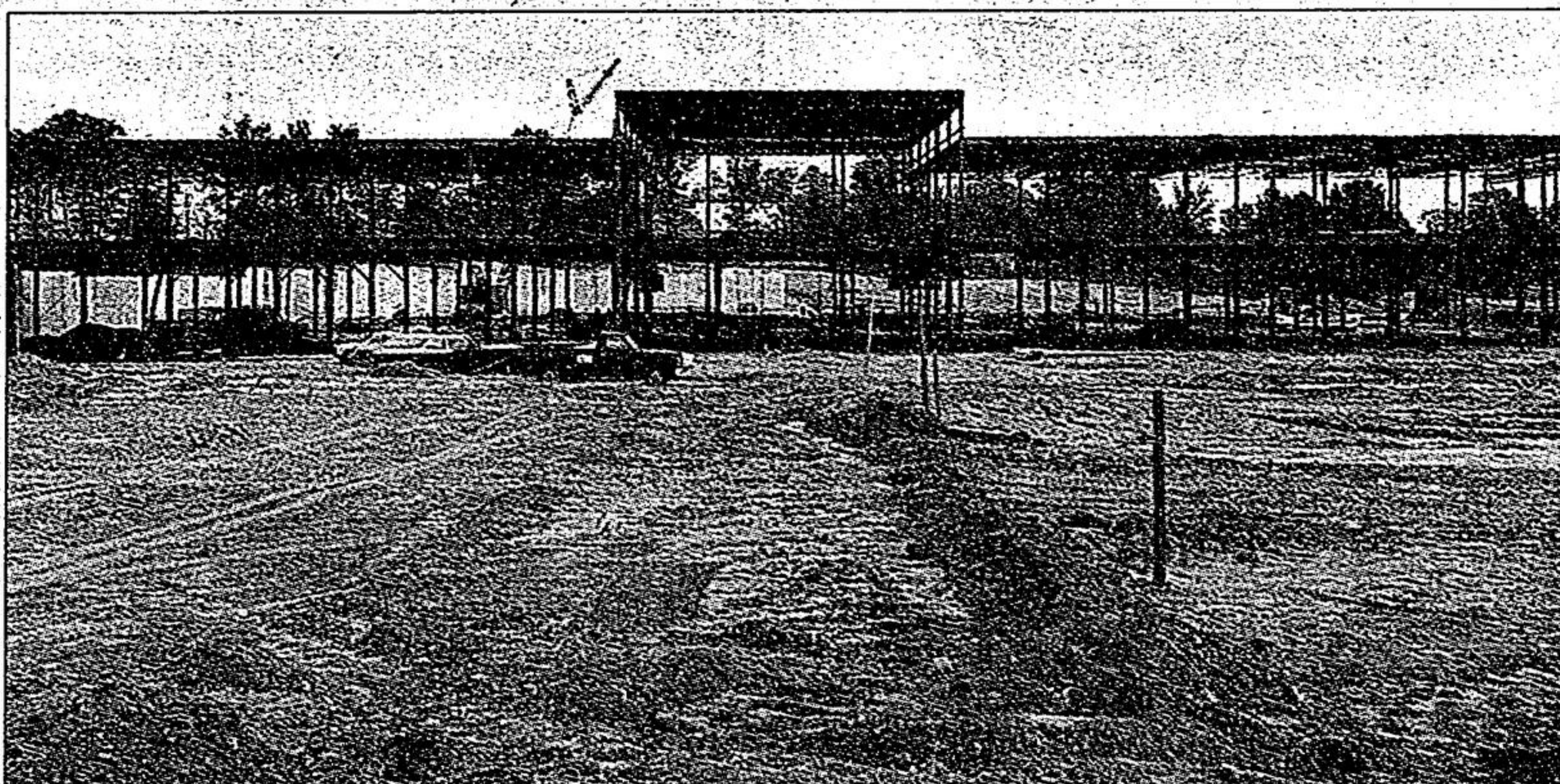
"We can also make the proper policy changes if we need to," he said.

Waller was reacting to stinging comments made last week by Edmund Fowler, an associate professor of political science at York University's Glendon College.

With more than 80,000 new residents in the region the past two years, and an expected population of nearly 1.3 million citizens by 2026, Fowler charged York Region is headed for chaos, a state of turmoil, as urban sprawl unearths a litany of problems ranging from health and social issues, combined with transportation woes and an uncertain economy.

But Waller and Bryan Tuckey, the region's planning commissioner, both contend urban sprawl is more significant in the United States than in Canada.

In the U.S., urban area densities average 1,225 persons per square km, compared to 2,625 in Canada,



During the 1970s York Region's first giant shopping malls — Upper Canada Mall in Newmarket (above) and Richmond Hill's Hillcrest Mall — were built. Markham's Markville Shopping Centre followed in the early 1980s, designed to meet the region's fast-growing population.

5,094 in Europe and 16,700 in Asia.

And as an example, Chicago's population grew 1 per cent between 1970 and 1990 while the developed land area increased by 24 per cent. And between 1950 and 1990, the San Francisco-Oakland population grew 80 per cent but urban lands soared by 205 per cent.

In York Region, net densities have increased from 15 units per hectare to nearly 30 units in the past 10 years.

"Growth is not like a water tap and you just can't turn it off. You have to plan for a longer period," Waller said.

"This is a free enterprise economy and there will always be a certain amount of growth that can arrive. If you turn off that tap, you'll

2026
Vision
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just begin to drive prices up."

By the end of last year, the region's population had jumped to more than 745,000 citizens, a 6-per cent growth rate when a clip of 2 to 3 per cent is deemed acceptable.

The region is now updating its official plan first adopted in 1994, asking residents for input as they prepare Vision 2026, a key planning document for the next quarter century.

But Patrick O'Hanlon, president of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association, said forward thinking is one thing but stretching those plans deep down the road is a difficult task.

"I find it almost impossible to plan for the next 25 years," claimed O'Hanlon, who also operates Angus Glen Development Ltd. in Markham. "Twenty-five years ago, no one would have known about the technological advances now in society. It's changing every year, not every 25 years.

"Just five years ago, you'd say every home has to have a fax machine, but now you don't even need one. In the future, the advances will be in technology, not in housing architecture."

New urbanism is a popular building approach today, taking elements of yesteryear to create new communities.

In Markham, the Cornell community is a vision of the future, a 600-hectare site eventually home to 30,000 people, featuring a town square with shops and services, garages in the back with houses close to sidewalks, creating a pedestrian-friendly community.

Mix-use buildings include Victorian homes, apartments over shops and three-storey town-homes.

"This is smart growth development," O'Hanlon says. "Everyone in the community is a five-minute walk away from open areas, walking trails and parks. Even 10 years ago, communities were not as attractive as they are now."

"Builders and developers are striving to create a difference and every year we come up with new innovations. Down the road, communities will have swimming pools and homeowner associations as baby boomers ask for more of a lifestyle where they live.

"We're just not 100 per cent there yet."

However, problems always arise with growth, points out Peter Homenuck, who founded planning consultant firm Institute of Environmental Research in 1971.

But the problems should not be insurmountable, he adds.

"Buildings go up so quickly that there is often little attention paid to quality detail. I can bring by an open field and two weeks later houses are up with people living there," said Homenuck, a Schomberg resident

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25 years ago, few knew how much region would grow

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

It's the first week of May, 1976.

The Montreal Canadiens are battling the New York Islanders in the Stanley Cup semi-final. All The President's Men and The Bad News Bears are playing in theatres. Montreal also conducts final preparations for the Olympics that summer.

York Region, just five years old still has three branch clubs of Junior Farmers and Farmerettes. The first of its major shopping centres, Upper Canada Mall in Newmarket

and Hillcrest Mall in Richmond Hill, opened two years ago and the third, Markville Shopping Centre in Markham, is on the drawing board and drawing polite threats from local merchants.

The merchants argue Markville's timing is wrong, that Markham doesn't have enough residents to support a big mall plus its old main street stores.

Others worry, too. Irene Emig of Unionville thought plans to build arterial roads would ruin her former village's small-town atmosphere. "More roads mean more traffic," she told a town meeting. "I see

the spectre of Scarborough arising — the whole area will be chopped up if these plans proceed."

Probably, very few of York Region residents — 207,788 in 1976 — guessed how much growth awaited them in the next 25 years.

The population tripled, to 772,000 this year. Five times as many people now work here. Population estimates the planners gave turned out wrong.

Markhamites, for instance, were told their town of 57,800 would reach 136,800 in 2001. The latest guess for this year is 218,000.

Part of the problem, former

Richmond Hill Mayor Al Duffy said recently, was too few people in the average home. Planners expected about 4.2, but the region's typical household had declined from 3.65 persons in 1971 to 3.39 in 1976, and stayed roughly the same.

Still, York Region's growth boom, which started immediately and kicked into high gear in the 1980s, also went against provincial policy.

On May 6, 1970, the day before it announced the birth of the future region, the province released Design for Development: The Toronto-Centred Region Plan (TCR).

The TCR sought to keep growth near the Lake Ontario shoreline — where it would be easier to service with sewers and mass transit — and away from York.

By 1976, the plan was already failing because the province, as if trying to contradict itself, was allowing the York-Durham sewer system, a major engine of growth, to be built along Yonge Street.

"York's population was expected to reach approximately 350,000 by the end of this century and the regional municipality was expected

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