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PEOPLE: Bryan Tuckey has no regrets

# Retiring York planning boss proud of less-sprawling region

BY DAVID FLEISCHER  
dfleischer@yrmg.com

It's surprisingly easy for York Region's outgoing planning director to illustrate what he thinks his legacy will be.

The shape of a pink, inverted-T amidst a field of green distinguishes York Region's urban structure, enshrined in the principles and plans Bryan Tuckey leaves behind when he retires this month.

"It's taken us 50 years to get where we are," he says of how the region has evolved from a series of disconnected communities, to a sprawling suburb, to — hopefully — a leader in curbing that sprawl.

Nearly 70 per cent of York Region's land is protected by greenbelt or Oak Ridges Moraine legislation, something that focused planning efforts on the remaining land in the urban south and in a central arm along either side of Yonge Street.

When he came to the region 11 years ago, Mr. Tuckey had already been a resident of Newmarket and Aurora and was excited about the opportunity to shape his own community.

He takes pride in where York Region has forged ahead, developing plans to protect the moraine before the province took an interest, for example.

The province's Places to Grow plan, which concentrates growth instead of sprawling further out, also borrowed pages from York's playbook. The region had already earmarked intensified development at key nodes and along transit corridors.

"When I came, the challenges were large and all consuming," he says. "I still say I have the best planning job in Ontario."

While principles of sustainability were in place as early as 1994, the region was transitioning to make them a reality, Mr. Tuckey says. The culmination of those efforts can be seen in matters coming up at his final planning committee this week. Foremost is Markham's plan to house more than 30,000 people in the Langstaff Gateway community at Yonge and Hwy. 407.

"The world changed for York Region with Places to Grow," he says of the province's growth plan. "The planning had to catch up and provide a platform for leadership in the future."

He also understands that while residents are coming to grips with the ideas of growth and intensification, they are wary of the pace at which change is arriving.

That said, Mr. Tuckey has no regrets and there's nothing he'd do different.

After years of talk, a master plan for encouraging cycling and pedestrian traffic is also now enshrined alongside measures that will ensure new development is more energy and water-efficient than before.

Of course, sprawl remains prevalent in York Region and even with intensification, it's not disappearing any time soon.

"We have what we have," Mr. Tuckey admits.

There will undoubtedly be challenges bringing a diversity of uses to communities consisting of little more than detached houses, but it's not impossible.

"Neighbourhoods are living organisms and they'll change with the times," he says.

Prior to his tenure with York Region, Mr.

Tuckey served in positions with the province's Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

He also worked in Toronto on the development of North York Centre, precisely the sort of transit-oriented intensification York Region now aims to create.

Today, he takes pleasure visiting the neighbourhood, seeing residents living, working and playing in the same area, walking to their condominiums toting shopping bags from local stores.

"My experience in North York showed me that the people who live closest to work aren't the ones causing the congestion. We need to get a better job match in York Region," he says.

"We'll do a better job because we have those experiences to draw from."

Implementation of the plans will be the challenge for his successors, Mr. Tuckey says, especially given it's a job in which results can take years, if not decades, to materialize.

Plans for North York Centre, for example, arose in the 1970s and Mr. Tuckey figures it will be at least 15 years until Vaughan's planned downtown at Jane Street and Hwy. 7 begins to show what it could become.

It was only a few years ago he'd earn laughs after showing renderings of what the corridor will look like.

With Viva and subway construction underway and 30-storey condos approved, they're not laughing anymore.

York Region is still very suburban, but has done better than municipalities that only pay lip service to moving forward, says Sustainable Urban Development Association executive director John Stillich.

"Deep down in their hearts, they do want to have a sustainable region," says the head of the non-profit organization that promotes progressive city building.

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Mr. Stillich also praised the new official plan as being "ahead of the curve."

Despite its big job developing the plan and dealing with ongoing community and economic development, the 80-person planning department is the smallest at the region.

Asked what he's most proud of, Mr. Tuckey lists two things: the first is the holistic, integrated approach the region took to revisiting its master plans in developing the new official plan. It ensures infrastructure, such as water, is co-ordinated with roads and transit.

The creation of the new official plan, passed last year, is what planners live for, Mr. Tuckey says.

He also takes pride in a greening strategy that has allowed the region to leverage 2,000 acres in co-operative purchases of land that will be protected in perpetuity.

For Mr. Tuckey, it comes back to keeping the green part of York Region green and getting everything right in the future.

"The map says it all," he says.