

Forgetting the Lessons of Planning History

By John Bacher

SINCE 1985 with the adoption of the Niagara Escarpment Plan and reforms achieved by the Greenbelt Plan of 2005, the Niagara Escarpment has enjoyed the Ontario's most effective land use

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planning system to enhance the protection of the natural environment. This is for good reason, with such wonders as old-growth but miniature bonsai-like cedar forests, vulnerable to human pressures.

The ancient relics on the Escarpment brow are supplemented by a variety of important ecosystems, such as wetlands which form the headwaters of native Brook Trout streams. The Niagara Escarpment supports 300 bird species, 53 mammals, 36 reptiles and amphibians, 90 fish and 100 varieties of special interest plant life, including 37 types of wild orchids.

While forest cover in most of southwestern Ontario fades from 25 per cent in 1970 to 18 per cent today, that of the Niagara Escarpment continues to grow. It is now at a level of 48 per cent. This is encouraged by development control, which encourages reforestation as a site condition for redevelopment.

Two years ago the importance of the Escarpment Plan and its complementary development control system was shown when Dufferin County repealed its forest protection bylaw. Now the

only area of the county where privately owned forests remain protected is the corridor protected by the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

The Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Greenbelt Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Growth Plan are now all going

through a process of public review. Last year the provincial government appointed a six-person panel, headed by former Toronto mayor David Crombie, to review the plans. The recommendations released shortly before Christmas form a report called "Planning for Health, Prosperity and Growth." It has been popularly described in the press as the "Crombie Report."

Attack on Control

The essence of the Crombie report is a call to roll back reforms in provincial plans to protect the Niagara Escarpment and other rare landscapes. One of the most infamous is its attack on development control, administered by the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC).

Without acknowledging how development control has encouraged the improvement of forest cover on the Escarpment, Crombie ridicules and attacks it. In his view the system contributes to "significant delays" and "duplication of review." Also alleged are, "lengthy and expensive hearing processes" and "impediments to rural and

agricultural economies." He calls for unspecified changes that would "streamline the process and reduce the duplication of effort."

Allow Urban Expansion

Another disturbing aspect of Crombie's recommendations is an end to the freeze imposed by the Greenbelt Plan on urban expansions in the Escarpment Rural Area. This could lead to a wave of urbanization on scenic farmlands near such important Escarpment landscapes as the Devil's Punchbowl, Rock Chapel and Cherry Heights in Hamilton.

In addition to calling for a gutting of current Escarpment regulations, Crombie opposes two important reforms urged by the NEC to improve them. One is the NEC's call to expand the Escarpment

revisions be considered by "the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry as part of its advice during the review."

One of the most fiery polemics of the Crombie report is directed against the NEC's call to prohibit new pits. These are opposed on the basis for the need to maintain aggregate supplies "close to market," ignoring the possibility of importation of supplies from western New York state.

Rather than relying on Crombie it is hoped that in revising the four provincial plans the provincial government will look for advice to the NEC, which has been protecting the Escarpment wisely since its creation in 1973. These 33 years of experience should provide a good model for the protection of the Oak Ridges

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Plan area from its current size of 194,00 hectares, by an additional 45,600 hectares. The other is the NEC's recommendation that the plan be amended to prohibit new aggregate operations in the Escarpment Rural Area. This was made on the basis that extraction below the water table would require perpetual pumping having negative impacts on water supplies and ecosystem integrity.

Crombie declines to give any reasons for his lack of support to expand the Escarpment Plan area. He simply suggests that these

Moraine through a similar system of development control. The Greenbelt's freeze on urban boundary expansions should also be continued in important water sources as Niagara's Lake Gibson and the headwaters of the Rouge and Humber rivers and Carruthers Creek.

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