

## **The Town of Markham Aspires to Create a Downtown**

The Town of Markham is the largest of the nine local municipalities that comprise the Regional Municipality of York, having grown by more than 20 per cent between 1996 and 2001. Its current population of 208,615 is expected to surpass 230,000 by 2021 and to exceed 275,000 by 2021.

Markham includes historic Unionville, Milliken and part of Thornhill. It is a unique blend of small town ambience, with village festivals, parades and country fairs, and corporate might, home to some of Canada's top head office complexes and state-of-the-art research facilities.

The town is one of North America's pre-eminent centres for advanced technology, sometimes referred to as "Silicon Valley North" or "Canada's high-tech capital."

While the town presently has no central downtown, it is unique in having two main streets – one in the original Markham village and one in Unionville. The town also has an active regional theatre and historic museum, and many recreational facilities, including excellent golf courses.

Early in the nineties, the town embarked on an ambitious plan to accommodate its future growth in a form more balanced, healthy and sustainable than the traditional suburban pattern of sprawling, independent communities of single-detached homes, industrial parks, and shopping centres.

Undertaken in 1992 and published in mid-1994, the *Markham Centre Study* calls for the creation of a central focus for the town and its many communities, a place where people can live and work in close proximity, where there are interesting shops, restaurants, outdoor cafes and entertainment to enliven the streets, and where people can walk, cycle or take public transit to meet their daily needs.

The plan incorporates many "New Urbanism" concepts as espoused by consultant Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, whose principals, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, are North American leaders in sustainable development.

Markham Centre includes more than 400 acres of parks of all kinds for enjoying the natural and scenic beauty of the Rouge River Valley or for active sports and recreational activities. Trails will link the various parks and open space in the centre and throughout Markham and York Region.

Markham Centre generally occupies the land between Highway 7 and Highway 407 between the Ontario Hydro transmission right-of-way and McCowan Road, an area of 402 ha (992 acres). Overall, Markham Centre will be home to about 25,000 residents and jobs for about 17,000 persons in almost 10 million square feet of office, industrial and retail space.

The area is divided into seven districts. The core area, between Warden Avenue and Kennedy Road, is slated for the most intensive development near the Unionville GO Station and along a new east-west road, dubbed “Central Boulevard” (our “Enterprise Boulevard”). This will be the focus for community life and provide a home for most of the shops and stores.

The plan calls for a concentrated, intensive centre for the town that provides housing of all types, especially townhouses and apartments; work places and daily shops within a short walk or transit ride; a new and elegant “main street” extending from Warden Avenue to the GO station; streets where cars, buses and pedestrians are equally welcome; vistas to open space and important civic buildings; and centrally located parks, schools, places of worship and social services.

In addition to providing transit access and connection throughout Markham Centre, Enterprise Boulevard will also be very pedestrian-friendly and will incorporate a linear urban park tied into a broader network of open space and parkland.

A key aspect of the plan is to protect and enhance the Rouge Valley and integrate it into the life of the community as a backbone for the entire town. Roads that abut the valley will wind along its route, providing access and views. Public squares, vest pocket parks and plazas will supplement larger open spaces.

### Official Plan Amendment for Markham Centre

Approved by the Ontario Municipal Board in 1997, Amendment No. 21, Central Area Planning District (Markham Centre) sets out the goal of the Markham Centre master plan as creating a “vibrant, intensive mixed use town centre...with a distinctive character as the urban core of the Town of Markham, which will become the focus of the town, unifying its many communities.”

The objective of the official plan amendment is to create a complete and integrated community of pedestrian-oriented neighbourhoods and districts containing a mix of land uses suitable to a town centre, including residential, commercial, employment, open space, and recreational, cultural and institutional facilities.

The residential development aims to create an urban environment that provides for safe, healthy and attractive neighbourhoods and to provide a range of housing types and densities. The commercial development aims to serve local residents and a broader market and to contribute to the mixed use nature of the area. For that reason, retail uses will be oriented to the street (not located inside malls) and service commercial uses will be located on the ground floor of buildings that may have commercial or residential uses above.

The plan calls for a wide range of employment opportunities to provide a high live/work ratio. To further support this goal, employment sites will have a high exposure to roads with transit access and will be permitted in mixed use zones.

Cultural and institutional facilities are also an important part of Markham Centre, to serve local residents and all town residents. They will be fully integrated into the community.

Transportation plans call for a street system that extends and connects with existing streets to facilitate not just auto traffic, but pedestrians and cyclists. The road system will also be designed to highlight the Rouge Valley, other natural features, plus civic, school and park sites. To the extent possible, transit stops will be located so as to allow 85 per cent of the population to be within a five-minute walk.

The Rouge Valley is at the heart of an open space network that is highly accessible and visible. Natural features will be preserved and enhanced, as will heritage features and structures throughout the centre.

Strict urban design guidelines will be applied to ensure attractive streetscapes, appropriate relationships between buildings and streets, key sites for landmark buildings, and opportunities for pedestrian activity. Views to the valley and to other parks and open space will be created and buildings will be placed close to the street with parking behind or below most buildings.

### **The Markham Centre Vision**

- **A Place for All** – a unique venue for cultural and institutional activities for all Markham residents and visitors
- **A Vibrant Centre** – a central area with a concentration of activities for people to live, work, shop and visit, and where public streets and squares provide the backdrop for public life
- **A Sense of Place** – a comfortable environment for pedestrians through increased street activity, human scale buildings, urban street character and high quality urban design
- **Integrated with Nature** – a downtown with the Rouge River and open space network at its heart, providing a strong connection to a magnificent natural setting
- **A “Walkable” Centre** – a central area where people can move safely, easily and comfortably on all streets and where walking, cycling and taking transit are the primary means of getting around
- **An Accessible Centre** – a place easily reached by public transit and supported by a highly connected road system

On July 9, 2003 Markham Council approved the Remington Group’s subdivision plan for Downtown Markham. Mayor Don Cousens called it a “watershed decision” for the town and “the most significant decision this council has ever made.”

## **Markham Centre Guiding Principles**

1. The Rouge River valley has a powerful influence on Markham Centre.
2. The transit routes and stops determine the intensity of activity, the focus of public spaces and the concentration of built form.
3. Highway 7 will be transformed from an interregional highway to a major urban boulevard with a concentration of activity, mix of uses and a high quality of urban design.
4. A grid of major and minor streets provides ease of access, which supports the mix and intensity of activity and helps define the structure of Markham Centre.
5. Public spaces, streets, courtyards and major urban places contribute to a “sense of place” for Markham Centre.
6. Well-defined streets, building placement and architectural character support public life and year-round activity.
7. Ecological sustainability, which ensures that the built form and public spaces protect and enhance the natural processes of the landscape, will define the future of Markham Centre.
8. Markham Centre will have a town-wide cultural social focus.
9. Maintaining a high quality of life in and around Markham Centre will require managing parking and traffic impacts.
10. Building and sustaining a high quality public environment will require a new financial framework.
11. The value placed on the quality of life in existing, adjacent communities is recognized, respected and supported.

### **Performance Measures**

The town has established performance measures that can be used to –

- Translate community values into measurable goals
- Facilitate citizen participation
- Provide an open, accountable process
- Monitor progress toward established principles

- Enable the incorporation of new technologies and best practices
- Challenge developers to provide new and better solutions
- Support communication with residents and key stakeholders.

The Markham Centre Advisory Committee hosted a series of public workshops and a conference to receive public input with respect to greenlands, transportation, built form, green infrastructure and public spaces. Then, **performance measures** were identified for each objective and **application checklists** were prepared.

Easily understood **performance indicators** were designed so that a “gold,” “silver” or “bronze” rating could be applied to development proposals as an indication of whether they meet or exceed the town’s standards and expectations.

### **How the Application Process Will Work:**

1. Staff use the application checklist to initially assess each development application.
2. Staff evaluate the application in terms of performance indicators.
3. The Citizen Advisory Committee reviews the application.
4. The developer presents its plans to the advisory group to obtain feedback and recommendations.
5. The developer is advised to incorporate recommendations from the advisory group.
6. The revised application is reviewed again by the advisory group.
7. A public meeting is held so that additional community input can be obtained.
8. A staff report is presented to the development services, committee and ultimately to Council for approval. The report addresses the application’s achievement of community values, goals and performance targets.

An annual “report card” will be compiled to summarize the results of the development process, identifying any performance measures that require clarification or revision. This will allow all stakeholders to review the development process as Markham Centre evolves over many years.

## **York Region Seeks to Balance Its Future Growth**

**Y**ork Region is the fastest growing part of the Greater Toronto Area and one of the fast growing municipalities in Canada, with a current population of 729,254, up 23 per cent in the past five years. The region's population has increased four-fold in the 30 years since York was created in 1971 and is expected to reach 970,000 by 2021 and 1,100,000 by 2021.

New jobs are being created at an even faster pace. Today there are more than 380,000 people working throughout the region. That number is expected to reach 500,000 by 2011 and 580,000 by 2021.

Much of the new growth will take place within the next decade and will be focused in the southern, more urban areas of the region.

The region encompasses 1,756 km<sup>2</sup> (678 sq. mi.) stretching from Toronto to Lake Simcoe, including urban neighbourhoods, mid-sized towns, small hamlets and villages, agricultural communities (counting more than 1,200 farms), and seasonal recreational communities. The region includes a number of sensitive natural features, including watersheds, forests and the unique Oak Ridges Moraine.

York Region has recognized that traditional development patterns and an over-reliance on auto travel by York residents are unsustainable practices. (A practice is considered unsustainable whenever meeting present needs compromises the ability of future generations to meet their needs.)

In recent years, the region has revised its official plan to put into place new policies that will protect the natural environment, promote economic vitality, engender healthy communities, and effectively manage growth. The region's Vision 2026 document, published last fall, introduces a strategic plan for the next quarter of a century, in effect painting the "big picture" for the future growth of the region.

A key goal of both documents is the creation of vibrant communities that are compact; have a strong sense of community; meet high standards of urban design; and that encourage pedestrian- and transit-oriented neighbourhoods. The need to better match housing and employment locations to reduce overall travel is specifically cited.

The region's draft Transportation Master Plan, published earlier this year, calls for the introduction of rapid transit service in four regional subcentres, including Markham Centre, as soon as possible. It also proposes a range of policies and programs to encourage increased use of public transit throughout the region, setting an ambitious target of doubling present transit use.

The report notes that traffic congestion is a problem in York Region, as it is throughout the GTA. In the morning rush hours, 47 per cent of York commuters head to jobs in Toronto, creating daily highway and road traffic jams. Only 8 per cent of rush hour trips in York Region are currently taken by transit.

The master plan recognizes that transportation has an impact on housing, job creation, human services and the shape of municipalities. Through 5-, 10-, and 20-year staging plans, it addresses the region's transportation needs to 2031. It focuses on increasing transit use, reducing total travel, promoting growth in regional centres, improving the movement of goods, and encouraging more walking and cycling.

Specific proposals call for the immediate provision of rapid transit to four regional centres and the corridors serving them; expansion of GO Transit commuter rail service; the creation of "gateways" where commuters can switch from cars to transit; and various steps that would give transit vehicles priority on the roads.

Two of the six transportation corridors slated for intensified growth and improved public transit service relate to the Downtown Markham site (Warden Avenue from Highway 7 to the Sheppard subway station; and Highway 7 from Yonge Street to Kennedy Road).

### Key Aspects of the York Region Official Plan

The region's official plan notes that a high quality of life for York residents depends on vibrant economic activity and opportunities for meaningful work. It also recognizes that in a global economy to attract and retain commerce, municipalities must offer residents and potential residents high quality living conditions, services and infrastructure.

It declares that prosperity is created by encouraging investment and creating a diverse economic base. One way identified to achieve these ends is to create conditions where more people live and work in the same community, by creating a better balance of employment and housing opportunities.

The official plan calls for future growth to take place in specific locations and in a manner that protects greenlands, agriculture, rural and resource areas. It establishes urban boundaries within which most new population and jobs should locate, establishes centres and corridors to provide a focus for new development, and provides transportation and public works networks to serve new development.

A limited amount of development is permitted in the countryside. In rural and agricultural areas, growth is encouraged to take place in towns, villages and hamlets. The region also intends to create a greenlands system as a permanent resource and important aspect of the region's quality of life and economic prosperity.

Finally, the official plan defines healthy communities as those that evolve in a way that preserves the natural environment and heritage, encourages community spirit and participation in decision-making, provides easy access to a range of services and leisure opportunities, provides efficient and safe traffic flow, and encourages social diversity and respect for a variety of lifestyles.

### Notable York Region Trends

- traffic congestion is a growing problem adversely affecting quality of life, the natural environment and economic competitiveness
- more variety in housing types has become evident in recent years but overall 65 per cent of homes are single detached; apartments are relatively scarce
- the population is aging (by 2026 there will be three times more people over 50)
- the population is increasingly ethnically diverse (there are already substantial multicultural communities)
- there is a growing disparity in incomes (more low income families and fewer middle income families)

- the nature of households is shifting from two-parent families to single persons and unrelated persons sharing a residence
- there is a growing number of “vulnerable” residents
- job creation is growing faster than population, and there is a shift toward business services and the office sector away from manufacturing, construction, warehousing and transportation

### Issues in York Region

There appears to be strong political and public support for reducing traffic congestion through the provision of better public transit service overall and the introduction of rapid transit service in the four development centres and the corridors that serve them.

However, there is a debate underway as to the appropriate technology to be used for rapid transit – bus rapid transit (the new buzzword for buses moving at high speed on separate rights-of-way and enjoying other advantages over other road traffic) versus light rail transit, almost always on its own right-of-way.

The region has formed a public-private partnership to provide rapid transit solutions. Debate is still underway with respect to the appropriate technology and the provision of federal or provincial funds to fund the public share of the capital costs.

An LRT system has higher capital costs and would require higher local taxes and/or higher subsidies from senior governments for operations and maintenance. It is also less flexible in the areas it can serve and might take longer to put into place.

One solution, apparently the favourite of regional staff, is to begin with bus rapid transit on exclusive rights-of-way that can evolve into an LRT system when demand dictates and funding is available.

Securing a funding partnership with senior governments remains an issue not just for transportation capital and operating needs, but for other infrastructure as well.

## **Common Goals Have Emerged Throughout the GTA**

**T**he Greater Toronto Area is the fifth largest urban area in North America and one of the fastest growing. The city-region is home to more than 5 million people – 46 per cent of the population of Ontario and 17 per cent of the population of Canada.

The GTA covers 7,042 km<sup>2</sup> (2,719 sq. mi.) and is composed of 29 separate regional and local municipalities that range in size from the city of Toronto, with a population of 2.4 million, to the township of Brock, with a population of 12,000. Despite the multitude of political jurisdictions, the area functions as a single economic, social and environmental region.

The GTA has diverse natural resources, including 200 km (124 mi.) of Lake Ontario shoreline and 57 km (35 mi.) of Lake Simcoe shoreline, many river systems, wetlands, areas of natural and scientific interest, conservation areas and provincial parks. Key natural features include 372 km<sup>2</sup> (141 sq. mi.) of the Niagara Escarpment and 500 km<sup>2</sup> (190 sq. mi.) of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

About two-thirds of the GTA is rural, containing more than 4,600 farms and representing about 7.5 per cent of all agricultural production in the province. Agriculture plays a key role in the economy of the GTA, generating an estimated \$1.4 billion in annual gross sales.

The population of the GTA doubled in the past three decades and is expected to grow at the rate of 100,000 persons annually to reach seven million, and perhaps as high as nine million, over the next 30 years. By 2031 the GTA will house more than one in every five Canadians.

The area contains 40 per cent of the Financial Post's top 500 Canadian companies, contributing to its economic output, which at an estimated \$188 billion annually amounts to *half* of the provincial gross domestic product and *one-fifth* of the Canadian gross national product. Canadian well beyond the GTA boundaries are dependent on the area's continued efficiency, competitiveness and prosperity.

### Co-ordinated Decision Making in the GTA

In 1998 the province established the Greater Toronto Services Board with a mandate to co-ordinate decision making among the local and regional governments within the GTA, plus Hamilton-Wentworth. At the end of 2001, the GTSB was ordered to cease operations in favour of proposed Smart Growth Management Panels, which are just beginning their work.

In effect, today there is no overall growth management policy to ensure that planning and development decisions or transportation and other infrastructure decisions are taken in a co-ordinated fashion throughout the GTA.

Nevertheless, during the GTSB's brief existence, it did publish several draft or final reports addressing broad GTA issues upon which there is both public support and political endorsement with respect to how the city-region should proceed, particularly in terms of transportation and the accommodation of future growth.

### Transportation

The board's strategic transportation plan, *Removing Roadblocks*, proposes a range of short- and long-term road and transit improvements to reduce congestion; improve the movement of people, goods and services; optimize the use of existing infrastructure; protect the natural environment and human health; support a desirable urban structure; be cost effective; and benefit interregional travellers.

The report notes that the costs are of such a magnitude that implementation can only proceed with a transportation investment partnership involving the federal, provincial and municipal governments and the private sector. To date, this has not materialized.

Once blessed with one of North America's finest transportation networks and strongest transit systems, the GTA today suffers major traffic congestion because the transportation system has failed to keep pace with demand and funds are not available to meet future needs. Congestion is estimated already to be costing \$2 billion a year due mainly to delays in truck deliveries.

Truck transport accounts for almost 75 per cent of goods movement in the area. Transportation costs represent as much as 15 per cent of the final cost of finished products and almost 5 per cent of Canada's real domestic product.

Congestion imposes additional economic, social and environmental costs that are less easily quantified but equally destructive, including increased fuel consumption, increased numbers of accidents, slower response time for emergency vehicles, increased air pollution, increased maintenance and rehabilitation of infrastructure, and lost economic and tourism opportunities as people and goods are tied up in travel.

With two million newcomers over the next two decades, the GTA and Hamilton will see more than four million vehicles making 15 million trips a day. Even though GO Transit carries 38 million passengers a year and can not totally meet demand today, officials predict demand will double by 2021.

Travel patterns are also shifting. More and more people live in the suburban GTA (Toronto's share of the total population will fall to about 37 per cent by 2021) and more and more companies are choosing to locate in the suburban regions (by 2021 Toronto's share of total jobs will fall to about 45 per cent).

The consequence is that most of the growth in travel will not be from the suburbs to the downtown core, but from one suburban centre to another. Given that travel in the suburban GTA today is overwhelmingly by private auto, and given that our major public transit routes are designed to move people to and from downtown Toronto, the trend is toward more travel by car.

If public transit is to play a greater role in moving people in the suburban GTA, land use patterns will have to change to higher density models that make transit service cost effective, as has recently begun to happen in North York, Scarborough and Mississauga city centres. Other municipalities, including York Region, have identified specific centres and corridors for more intense development and a rapid transit network to make them successful.

*Removing Roadblocks* advocates a wide range of road and transit improvements. Some of those most relevant to future development in suburban centres such as Markham Centre are listed below:

- There should be more compact development and more mixed-use communities whose designs support transit use, walking and cycling, even while preserving the diversity of neighbourhoods that exist throughout the region.
- Development patterns that support travel by alternatives to low-occupancy vehicles should be implemented in rural, suburban and urban communities according to the concepts of their official plans.
- Roads and transit and truck routes should be planned, co-ordinated and implemented to be convenient and continuous across the region.
- Fully accessible transit should be available at effective and appropriate levels across the region, be given priority over low-occupancy vehicles and be supported by co-ordinated services, integrated fares, quick and convenient intermodal connections, transit priority measures, and transit-supportive parking policies.
- Travellers should enjoy a variety of choices of mode for all trips, and be safe and secure regardless of which mode they choose.
- Average auto occupancy should increase; and walking, cycling and transit use should increase as a proportion of all trips.

The report calls for rapid transit corridors that might be implemented in stages (designated bus lanes or high-occupancy vehicle lanes then moving to separate rights-of-way or to streetcars, subways or trains). East-west movement across the region is given high priority.

One proposed corridor is the Scarborough-Markham corridor, from Markham to the Scarborough RT line at Scarborough City Centre, with alternative alignments including such roads as Highway 48, McCowan Road and Warden Avenue.

The report also calls for enhanced capacity of existing GO Transit rail lines, including two-way all-day service on the Stouffville line between Markham and Union Station with extended rush hour service to Stouffville; and later extension of the Stouffville line to Uxbridge.

The existing Unionville GO Station is also cited as a potential gateway to induce commuters to leave their cars and switch to public transit.

### Growth Management

The board's draft plan for the countryside, *A GTA Countryside Report*, proclaims that the continued viability of the countryside (agricultural and rural lands, greenlands, tourism and recreational amenities, and natural features including groundwater and aggregate resource areas) is vital to the GTA's high quality of life and economic competitiveness.

The report demonstrates that the countryside is under siege from continued expansion of the urban boundary. Between 1976 and 1996, 150,000 acres of farmland were lost to urbanization and an equal amount could be lost over the next 20 to 30 years if these trends continue.

The report calls for public transit investment to support preferred growth patterns, and infrastructure decisions that do not attract urban growth into countryside areas.

Current policies are seen to be leading to a range of negative consequences, including increased traffic congestion and resulting increased air pollution; loss of agricultural land and aggregate resources; compromised agricultural and aggregate industries due to land use conflicts and growth pressures; irreversible damage to groundwater resources, plant and wildlife habitats, woodlots and other environmentally significant areas; lost or destroyed open space, visual landscapes and natural resources; erosion of the quality of life and cultural heritage attributes of rural communities; and towns and villages engulfed by urban sprawl and rural residents forced to travel outside their communities for employment and services.

To protect the GTA countryside, the report recommends that a permanent rural area be protected in order to retain the character and quality of life attributes that are intrinsic to the countryside. This would be achieved mainly by focusing the majority of the projected GTA population growth to existing fully serviced urban areas.

It also called for the protection of significant natural features in order to maintain a healthy, sustainable ecosystem and the quality of the visual landscape. Reinforcement of the agricultural industry was recommended to protect the agricultural land base from land use conflicts.

### Quality of Life

The board's most recent assessment of the health of the GTA, *State of the GTA 2000*, found several ongoing problems, emerging issues and potential vulnerabilities that require attention and effective, co-ordinated responses.

These include current urban development patterns that are unsustainable; a worsening transportation problem; the not-so-distant future financial burdens of increasing social dependency, particularly tied to an aging population; increasing polarization within the GTA between inner and outer areas, between neighbourhoods, and between renters and owners; energy use and dependency under sustained high prices.