



# Land Use Planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe 2021 Value-for-Money Audit

## Why we did this audit

- From 1996 to 2021, the Greater Golden Horseshoe's (GGH) population increased by 57%, from 6.5 million to an estimated 10.2 million.
- Past unchecked growth in the GGH led to the loss of agricultural land and natural spaces, degradation in air and water quality, increased risk of chronic diseases, increased demand for infrastructure, increased traffic congestion, and unaffordable housing.
- Land-use planning is the process that guides decisions about where and what types of development can occur—for example, where to build homes, factories, hospitals, schools, roads and other essential infrastructure—and where different types of development should not occur.

## Why it matters

- The GGH's population is forecast by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to increase by another 45% to 14.8 million by 2051.
- The region generates two-thirds of Ontario's annual GDP and contains some of the most productive farmland in Canada.
- Ecologically-significant natural features like the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine can also be found in the region.
- Good land-use planning ensures that lands are used to meet the current and future needs of communities and the people who live in them, while safeguarding valuable resources such as agricultural lands, wetlands, forests and distinctive natural features and landscapes.

## What we found

### Growth Plan Targets Not Met by Most Municipalities

- Much of the historical growth in the GGH occurred in the form of sprawl characterized by scattered, low-density development; hence the Province developed the Growth Plan for the GGH that came into effect in 2006 and was last amended in 2020.
- Since 2015, the Ministry has not measured or publicly reported on the effectiveness of land-use planning in achieving the goals of the Growth Plan.
- Many municipalities are falling short of 2006 Growth Plan targets.
  - For example, only three of 20 single- and upper-tier municipalities in the GGH met the target to focus 40% of new residential developments per year in already-developed areas from 2015 to 2019.
- The Ministry did not have consistent and timely information to accurately measure whether municipalities are meeting certain Growth Plan targets.

### RECOMMENDATIONS 1-3

### Growth Plan Implementation Difficult Due to Changing Provincial Policies and MZOs

- Municipalities face challenges implementing the province's Growth Plan policies because of numerous changes to land-use policies (five amendments in nine years) and insufficient guidance from Ministry staff. They are challenged to ensure planning documents are up to date.
- Some Minister's Zoning Orders (MZOs) disrupt planning processes and undermine the goals of the Growth Plan.
  - For example, 13 of 44 MZOs issued between March 2019 and March 2021 would permit development in areas that may not have existing or planned municipal services such as water and wastewater systems impacting local land-use and fiscal planning processes.

### RECOMMENDATIONS 4, 5, 11

### **Not Enough Collaboration with Other Planning Entities**

- Opportunities exist to better coordinate land-use planning with planning for critical infrastructure and services such as highways, transit, schools and hospitals.
- Some municipal planning policy submissions could have benefitted from additional circulation to other ministries for input to ensure the other ministries land-use interests were considered.
- Bill 229 amendments to the *Conservation Authorities Act* and *Planning Act* will give the Natural Resources Minister authority to issue development permits in flood- and erosion-prone areas. Prior to the amendment, conservation authorities had the sole authority.

### **RECOMMENDATION 6-8**

### **Minister's Zoning Orders Lack Standard Criteria, Bypass Normal Planning Processes**

- MZOs are being used to fast track development and bypass normal planning processes that ensure sufficient due diligence through studies and public consultation. From March 2019 to March 2021, 44 MZOs were issued. Prior to this, MZOs were issued about once a year.
- There is no formal process that interested parties are required to follow to request an MZO, and there are no established criteria against which the Minister assesses requests for MZOs. Seventeen of the 44 MZOs were issued to the same seven development companies or groups of companies.
- MZOs have become even more powerful with recent legislative amendments. For example, in 2021, Bill 257 amended the *Planning Act* to provide that MZOs are not required and are deemed to never have been required to be consistent with the Provincial Policy Statement, which all land-use decisions are required to be consistent with.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS 9, 10, 12**

## **Conclusions**

- Numerous changes to the land-use planning policies, insufficient collaboration between the Ministry and other entities responsible for infrastructure planning, and the Province's intervention in municipalities through Minister's Zoning Orders, have undermined the goals of the Growth Plan.
- The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing does not have effective procedures and systems in place to ensure that land-use planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe is consistent with good land-use planning practices, the purposes and objective of the Planning Act, and the Growth Plan for the GGH.
- Opportunities remain for land-use planning to be better integrated with planning processes for infrastructure and services such as highways, transit, schools and hospitals.
- Since 2015, the Ministry has not measured or reported on the effectiveness of land-use planning for achieving key goals of the Growth Plan. The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe was developed to avoid the negative impacts of past unchecked growth in the region.

Read the report at [www.auditor.on.ca](http://www.auditor.on.ca)