

Policy Brief: What is Urban Planning

■ What is the issue?

Urban planning has been described as a 'marriage between people and their surroundings'. It is about understanding how the built environment influences human behavior and interaction. The built environment and our place within it aren't accidental. Cities are human creations that we all have the power to shape and reshape. Planning is a forward-looking exercise concerned with the development and use of land, protection and use of the environment, social well-being, urban design and infrastructure.

Urban planning is a technical and political process which relies upon the expertise of various professionals including urban planners, architects and civil engineers; however public input is equally as important as professional opinions.

We all interact in different ways with different aspects of our urban environment; from when, where and how we move about the City, to what places or neighbourhoods we like or don't like. While we may not notice it, planning affects almost every part of our daily lives. Urban planning strives to balance individual property rights and the greater public good. The strategic visioning of urban planning often leads to difficult decisions where long term benefits outweigh short term challenges.

■ A hierarchy of policies.

Urban planning in Ontario is 'policy led'. The Province sets out a series of policies or 'Provincial Interests' that municipalities must abide by. Provincial interests are laid out in the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS). The PPS speaks to matters such as protecting the natural environment and resources, facilitating compact urban form, limiting rural development and ensuring adequate supporting infrastructure.

All local planning documents and land use decisions must be consistent with Provincial Policies. In this sense, the provincial planning regime is hierarchical in nature. Our Official Plan must be consistent with Provincial Policies, and our zoning by-law must be consistent with the Official Plan.

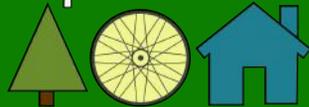


■ Urban planning within the local context.

Urban planning in the face of limited growth and a relatively flat economy is a much different practice than urban planning in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) or other major urban centres experiencing significant growth.

What places in the Sault make me think, "That's some good planning"?

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While planners in the GTA can leverage developers to improve adjacent public spaces, incorporate public art or even make financial contributions to support nearby public projects, profit margins do not allow for this locally. In fact, we are one of the few cities in Ontario that does not have Development Charges. In Sault Ste. Marie, some have argued that building development equals economic development; however, for a variety of reasons, this is not necessarily the case.

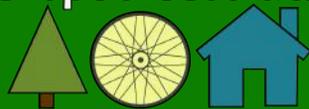
The scale of development in Sault Ste. Marie also creates a number of challenges. In the GTA, where residential developments can easily include 1000+ dwelling units, it is much easier to plan for complete neighbourhoods, with nearby commercial services and community facilities planned and constructed along with the homes. Given the small scale of local developments, this is very difficult to achieve.

The resulting approach, which is quite common in cities with flat or no growth, can at times be characterized as ad-hoc. To a degree, a certain level of creativity and thinking outside the box is required. In some cases this has gone to a level of thinking outside of the Plan or long term vision, resulting in a number of problematic legacies. For example, the relocation of the hospital has created a modern medical institution, but has also created a number of challenges, including altered traffic patterns requiring costly road upgrades and a relocation of medical offices away from the downtown. Suffice to say, urban planning is a delicate balance between being flexible enough to facilitate all forms of development in a timely manner, while at the same time creating and adhering to a master vision.



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