

# Waterloo Region Healthy Communities Coalition

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Chairman Ken Seiling & Members of Regional Council  
150 Frederick St  
Kitchener, ON N2G 4J3

May 12, 2009

Dear Councillors,

Our Coalition would like to share our perspective with regard to the second draft of the Regional Official Plan (ROP).

The Waterloo Region Healthy Communities Coalition (WRHCC) is a group of individuals and organizations with a common interest in seeing Healthy Communities principles implemented in this Region. We believe that, to be healthy, a community requires a balance among its environment, society and economy.

Overall, we feel that the current draft of the ROP is a very strong step in the right direction of moving our region toward becoming a healthier community.

We expressed this overall support for the ROP in a detailed letter (dated January 22, 2009) commenting on the first draft, and continue to view the second draft as a strong statement of our Region's values. We commend Regional planning staff for the significant work they have done to put forward proposed policies which will limit further urban sprawl, encourage urban intensification, and seek to protect our valuable ecosystem.

Our January 22<sup>nd</sup> letter also described a number of concerns we had with some of the specifics of the ROP. We are particularly grateful for the effort that Regional staff put into addressing each suggestion made by our group and the many other public submissions they received. Nevertheless, many of the concerns we expressed with regard to the first draft of the ROP continue to be concerns we have with the second draft. We appreciate that staff provided references to the documents which are relevant to our concerns regarding the sustainable carrying capacity of the Region. With the tight timeline for responding we did not have time to fully review these documents as a group in order to provide a collective informed response.

With respect to the City of Guelph's negotiations with the Province regarding sustainable levels of growth, we have provided you with the documents which we based our comments on. One of the documents is a letter from the Province to the City of Guelph dated June 19, 2008.<sup>1</sup> We understood the following lines to mean that the Province acknowledged the water and waste water issues which might limit Guelph's capacity for growth in the future. "The Ontario Growth Secretariat recognizes that the City of Guelph and the County of Wellington both face constraints in delivering water and wastewater services that are unique to the geography and physical environment of the area." "We also acknowledge that limitations posed by limited ground and surface water sources may also constrain population growth into the future." Like Guelph, we feel that we have unique constraints to growth, in particular air quality and future water quantity and quality.

Rather than addressing other details at this stage in the process of reviewing the ROP, we want to encourage Councilors to take a step back and look at the big picture. Our Coalition has continued to ask staff and Council to consider the health of our environment and our residents first when making any and all decisions related to long-term land-use. The vision described in the ROP's introduction, and the introductory text at the beginning of each chapter, indicates that this Region has those priorities right.

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<sup>1</sup> See pages 62-64 of [http://guelph.ca/uploads/PBS\\_Dept/planning/documents/Guelph%20Growth%20Management/08-83\\_%20June%202003\\_08%20-%20LGMS%20Addendum%20report%20FINAL%20includes%20letter%20from%20PIR%20Ministry\\_PK.pdf](http://guelph.ca/uploads/PBS_Dept/planning/documents/Guelph%20Growth%20Management/08-83_%20June%202003_08%20-%20LGMS%20Addendum%20report%20FINAL%20includes%20letter%20from%20PIR%20Ministry_PK.pdf)

We understand that any high-level policy document like the ROP needs to leave some flexibility for unanticipated circumstances and exceptions, and we understand that our two-tier system of government requires the Region to leave the municipalities some room to make their own decisions. But the consequences of bad planning decisions will last decades and are significant. We want to encourage Council to apply the ROP policies as stringently as possible in keeping with the principles, now and into the future.

We know that the design of the built environment influences people's individual day-to-day life choices, which, in turn, influences their own physical health. For example, connectivity of the street network affects individual transportation choices, which impacts air quality, which affects the health of the entire population. We know we cannot continue to depend on food imported from faraway places, and so we must do everything we can to prevent the paving of our rich agricultural land and make it easier for local farmers to earn a living growing food. And we know that we have a finite supply of drinking water, and a limit to how much wastewater we can discharge into our rivers, so we must do everything we can to limit our use of water and to protect our water recharge areas.

These are the kinds of concerns we have when we look at the ROP to see if it will help get us towards a healthier community. We believe the current draft of the ROP embodies those concerns, but we ask Councilors to consider two things:

1) Resist the pressure you are receiving to water down the ROP. We understand that some people are asking you to eliminate the Protected Countryside, expand the Countryside Line and make it "flexible," place fewer limits on the extraction of aggregate resources, etc. Please think beyond the interests of private individuals and jurisdictional disputes and consider the long term effects of these policies on the health of the population.

2) Seek to enforce the ROP's vision in all future Council decisions. You will be asked to make many decisions in the future which will determine whether the true spirit of the ROP is implemented. Examples include the Official Plans of the seven area municipalities, budget decisions on roads versus public transit and walking/cycling facilities, tax incentives for encouraging density or affordability, the Long-Term Water Strategy of building a Great Lakes Pipeline, etc. Please keep the elements of a healthy community in mind as you consider those decisions.

Finally, we want to direct you to a few recent studies on the links between land use and health that have influenced our thinking. We have attached a 2-page summary of a few of the highlights of four documents which address the health impact of urban sprawl. We highly recommend reading the documents, as they convey the health implications of the kinds of planning decisions you are being asked to consider. The clerk's office has a hard copy of each of them.

Sincerely,



Sam Abisaab,



Trudy Beaulne,



and Joy Finney

on behalf of the members of the  
Waterloo Region Healthy Communities Coalition

cc. Kevin Curtis, Administrator, Policy Planning, Region of Waterloo Planning

**Appendix:**  
**Highlights from research related to Health and the Built Environment,**  
**relevant both to ROP and to Rapid Transit decisions**

(We recognize there is always inherent bias when taking quotes out of their context and so invite Councilors to read the full documents which we have given to the Clerk's office. Full references and links to the articles online are at the bottom of this document.)

“Urban (or suburban) sprawl leads to increased traffic, which in turn leads to increased accidents and fatalities (motorists, pedestrians and cyclists), as well as negative mental health impacts (stress, road rage and anxiety) ... The impact of fatalities and disabilities from traffic accidents on society cannot be underestimated.” (OCFP, p. 5)

For example, **motor vehicle collisions are “the leading cause of death in the U.S. between the ages of 4 to 35, and third after cancer and heart disease in terms of years of life lost prematurely in the entire population.”** (OCFP, p. 25)

“Recent research suggests that **long-term exposure to air pollution causes lung cancer, may cause asthma** (as opposed to aggravating pre-existing asthma, and, most importantly, **may affect normal development and growth of the lungs in children.**” (OCFP, p. 16) (The authors explain that they have focused on the health effects of pollutants derived from vehicle traffic.)

“The general conclusion of these types of studies relates higher mortality and morbidity rates to increased local traffic. This is more relevant to areas of higher urban density than to less dense areas. It might even be argued that sprawl, by separating higher traffic zones from housing, may mitigate this local effect on air quality. However, **residents in sprawl areas spend significantly more time driving or as passengers in vehicles, and are therefore more exposed during this time.** It is also likely that the increased emissions from more vehicle kilometres driven associated with sprawl, would overshadow this mitigating effect by negatively impacting regional air quality. (OCFP, p.15)

For more information on how the Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP) links higher mortality and morbidity from air pollution to urban sprawl see their report, p.8-20.

“**Air pollution is now a year-long threat to the heart health of Canadians,** says the 2008 Heart and Stroke Foundation Report Card on Canadians' Health. Yet a national poll by the Foundation has revealed that **only 13% of Canadians have made the connection between air pollution and cardiovascular disease.**” (HSF, p. 1)

Every year, there are approximately 6,000 additional deaths in Canada because of short term exposure to air pollution, and research suggests that 69% of these deaths come in the form of cardio and cerebrovascular disease. (HSF, p. 1)

Since the early 1990's, a growing body of evidence from Canada, the U.S. and Europe has documented **increased rates of heart attack, and more hospitalizations for serious heart diseases such as heart failure, and stroke, after both short and long-term exposure to polluted air,**” says Dr. Beth Abramson, Heart and Stroke Foundation spokesperson and cardiologist. (HSF, p. 1)

“In 2007 the Heart and Stroke Foundation partnered with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to launch a major \$4.1 million research initiative to study how community design affects physical activity and, consequently, heart health. According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation poll, **95% of Canadians strongly or somewhat agree that “the government should do more to reduce air pollution.”** (HSF, p. 3)

The Foundation recommends that governments can take action to reduce air pollution and its impact on heart disease by “working with developers to create neighbourhoods and communities that promote walking, cycling, and decrease auto dependency.” (HSF, p. 4)

“Given that most studies to date point to the growing health effects of sprawl, why not practice prevention? **Land-use and transportation policies have a direct bearing on public health in Ontario,** and as such, **health impact costs should be incorporated into and drive future planning.** We have the choice to continue to build sprawling areas that contribute to increased air pollution, more time spent in cars, and disappearing greenspace; or the choice to build healthy, vibrant communities that offer a wealth of opportunities for walking, cleaner air, and the enjoyment of better health.” (OCFP, p. 39)

“‘We shape our buildings,’ said Winston Churchill, ‘thereafter, they shape us.’ The same could be said of our cities and communities. But unlike a building, cities can’t be simply torn down and rebuilt. The damage they do lives on long after the buildings they include have gone.” (CMHA, p. 6)

#### References:

1. Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP), “Report on Public Health and Urban Sprawl in Ontario,” January 2005 (53 pages). <http://www.ocfp.on.ca/English/OCFP/Urban-Sprawl/>
2. Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), “We Are Where We Live,” in *Network*, Summer 2008 (2 pages). <http://www.ontario.cmha.ca/network.asp?cID=25672>
3. Ontario Professional Planners’ Institute (OPPI), *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities, A Call to Action*, Fall 2007 (24 pages). [http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca/pdf/Healthy\\_Sustainable\\_Communities\\_2007.pdf](http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca/pdf/Healthy_Sustainable_Communities_2007.pdf)
4. Heart and Stroke Foundation (HSF), “Canada’s heart health up in the air, says the 2008 Heart and Stroke Foundation Report Card on Canadians’ Health,” January 2008, (4 pages). [www.heartandstroke.on.ca/site/c.pvI3IeNWJwE/b.4154961/k.EB22/2008\\_Report\\_Card\\_Air\\_Pollution.htm](http://www.heartandstroke.on.ca/site/c.pvI3IeNWJwE/b.4154961/k.EB22/2008_Report_Card_Air_Pollution.htm)