Guidelines For Reviewing Official Plans

Building Healthy Communities Together

HKPR Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit
Updated – December 2008
Guidelines For Reviewing Official Plans

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NOTE: This document gives a brief overview of Official Plans and their role in helping Municipalities guide the land-use planning process. It is intended as an introduction for public health professionals and members of the public who are outside the municipal planning field.

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1. **Land-Use Planning**

Land-use planning means managing land and resources in a responsible manner. Proper planning helps a community – or Municipality – set goals about how it will grow and develop, and to work out ways of reaching those goals while keeping important social, economic and environmental concerns in mind. Land-use planning balances the interests of individual property owners with the wider interests and objectives of the whole community. The built environment has an important role to play in both an individual’s and a community’s health. Various policy documents can be used to help plan for healthy communities.

**The Provincial Policy Statement**

The Provincial Policy Statement is the policy document that complements Ontario's Planning Act. It provides policy direction to decision makers on matters of provincial interest related to land-use planning and development. The Planning Act requires that the Provincial Policy Statement be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure its policies are still effective. The new Provincial Policy Statement (2005) took effect on March 1, 2005.

The Provincial Policy Statement contains clear, overall policy directions on matters of provincial interest. A Municipality’s Official Plan "shall be consistent with" the Provincial Policy Statement issued under the Planning Act. This means a municipal council is obliged to consider the application of a specific policy statement when carrying out its planning responsibilities. It is expected that the council will implement the Provincial Policy Statement in the context of other planning objectives and local circumstances.

The Planning Act, Provincial Policy Statement and municipal Official Plans are the three key documents that guide land-use planning in Ontario. For more information, see the Citizen’s Guide to Land-Use Planning on the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing website. ([http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page338.aspx](http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page338.aspx)).

**What is an Official Plan?**

An Official Plan is an important document because it outlines policies on how land in your community should be used. With input from citizens, your municipal council prepares the Official Plan so that it helps ensure that future planning and development will meet the specific needs of your community. Official Plans are policy documents; they are not pieces of legislation. However, they are legislated through Part III, sections 16 through 27 of the Planning Act in Ontario. Official Plans may be amended upon application to the local planning authority and are reviewed through a public process every five years.

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3. Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing [http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1759.aspx](http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1759.aspx)
4. Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing [http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1759.aspx](http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1759.aspx)
An Official Plan deals mainly with issues such as:

- Where new housing, industry, offices and shops will go
- What services like roads, water mains, sewers, parks and schools will be needed
- When and in what order parts of your community will grow

**What is the Official Plan Process?**

*Pre-consultation ~ Public Meeting ~ Input*

When considering an Official Plan, your local council, planning board or municipal planning authority must ensure that:

- The appropriate approval authority is consulted
- At least one public meeting is held, notice of which must be given at least 20 days ahead of time (usually through local newspapers or by mail)
- Adequate information, including a copy of the proposed plan, is made available to the public in advance of the public meeting

Any person or public body present at the public meeting has a right to speak about the proposed plan. The council may be required to consult with agencies, boards, authorities or commissions before making a decision regarding an amendment to an Official Plan.

**2. Official Plan Review**

People reviewing Official Plans should be familiar with the following documents:

- Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities – OPPI [http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca/content/Publications/innovativepolicypapers.aspx](http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca/content/Publications/innovativepolicypapers.aspx)
- Places to Grow Act (and applicable Growth Plans) [http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_05p13_e.htm](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_05p13_e.htm)

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5 Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing [http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1759.aspx](http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1759.aspx)
- Active Communities Charter *
http://www.hkpr.on.ca/uploadedFiles/ActiveCommCharter.pdf

* Or local pedestrian charter / cycling charter / healthy community vision document

3. Review Process

When reviewing Official Plans, the following three-step process is recommended:

**Step One**
Read through the entire plan. Official Plans will be organized in different ways, but will usually start with an overview (including goals and objectives). These provide a good sense of what the plan includes. As you read through, highlight key words/phrases/statements that relate in some way to designing active communities. A suggested list of words to look for follows. Look for links of words and ideas to the Active Communities Charter (or other local charter/vision document). It may even be helpful to have the Charter beside you while you read, to remind yourself of the principles and values outlined in it. The purpose of this read-through is to get familiar with the content, and get an overall sense of the priority for healthy, active communities in the Official Plan.

**Step Two**
Read through the plan again. Look for places to make positive comments. The primary purpose of this read-through is to identify links and connections between different comments, statements and sections. For example, if affordable housing is mentioned in one section, is there a related statement about transit service under public transportation? (i.e. speaks to the need for accessible services from housing) Or, if having a vibrant downtown is mentioned in economic development, is there discussion elsewhere in the plan acknowledging the importance of creating pedestrian-friendly infrastructure? (i.e. recognizing the economic impact of walkable communities)

This step will take some time, and may even require a couple more read-throughs to get a complete sense of where connections exist or are lacking.

**Step Three**
Create an overall response. Go back to the overview of the Official Plan. Is there anything in the overview that speaks to health, and/or active communities? If yes, this is an opportunity to provide positive comment, and suggest the adoption of the Active Communities Charter as a way of entrenching principles and values into the plan. If the answer is no, this is an opportunity to recommend the adoption of the Charter and make a case for including healthy, active communities as a worthwhile goal in the Official Plan. Refer to the Case for Healthy, Active Communities document as an example.
Add more specific comments (both positive comments and recommended changes or additions) that reflect your observations of the plan from Step Two. You may also have recommendations about the development of secondary plans, based on what is in the Official Plan. For example, if trails are mentioned as a priority, recommend investing in a trails master plan. If cycling is identified, suggest a cycling master plan.

**Some things to look for in the Plan Overview (or elsewhere):**

- Is health, or healthy, active communities mentioned as a goal?
- In the case of two-tiered governments, is there mention made of coordination between upper and lower tier governments? (This is a point that is made in the Provincial Policy Statement, part V, section 1.2.)
- Is there mention made of partnership with other community groups to achieve the goals and objectives laid out in the Official Plan?
- Is there mention about a process for community consultation? Around what kind of projects?
- Is there a section on definitions for key terms?

**Key Words/Phrases to look for and highlight:**

- Downtown revitalization
- Vibrant downtown
- Economic development
- Quality of life
- Environment – sustainability, air quality, etc.
- Proximity to recreation resources
- Parks
- Open space
- Facilities (recreation, transportation…)
- Trails – connections, linkages, destinations, accessibility
- Housing – density, location, transportation, various types
- Servicing and maintenance
- Access to services
- Transportation – alternative modes of transportation
- Linking routes – e.g. between workplaces, schools, services
- Pedestrian/cycling environment, infrastructure
- Recreation services
- Parking areas – staging areas
- Roads – maintenance, bike lanes, walkways/sidewalks
- Health – does it go beyond environmental health issues?
- Community participation/engagement/consultation
- Partnership/collaboration
- Growth – Smart Growth, Sustainable Growth
Key Policy Areas to Review in the Official Plan
Below are some particular policy areas to pay special attention to when reading the Official Plan:

Settlement Areas
- Are there guidelines about where?
- Any guidelines for density targets?

Commercial Use and Development
- Guidelines about where this takes place?
- Does it encourage sprawl (e.g. big box development) or is mixed use encouraged?

Housing
- Affordability?
- Does it speak to needs of special populations (e.g. seniors, low income families)?
- Mention of proximity of affordable housing to services?
- Do they appear open to higher density housing, intensification projects and infilling?

Employment Areas
- Is there mention of access to these areas being a priority? (e.g. These roads routes to be considered for bike lanes and better maintained sidewalks)

Retail Use/Shopping Centres
- What does it say about parking access and pedestrian access?
- Are there statements that reflect context sensitive design? (i.e. awareness of how a new retail development can impact the surrounding environment)

Transportation
- Are alternative modes of transportation mentioned and encouraged?

Open Space, Parks, Crown Lands
- Are parks and trails identified? Given priority?
- How are motorized/non-motorized uses and interests differentiated? What types of uses are permitted where? Is there a process identified for determining use on trails?

Group Homes, Rooming/Boarding Houses
- Is location considered with respect to access to services and availability of public transit?

Brownfield Development
- Is this mentioned? How?
Rural designation
– What do they say about development in rural designated areas?
– In particular re: residential lot creation.

Urban designation
– Is there mention of meeting pedestrian needs? Cycling needs?
– Mention of proximity of recreation and park facilities?
– Is development encouraged to connect to existing development?

Highway Commercial Designation
– Is there accommodation for needs of pedestrians and cyclists to access services?
– Mention of safe and convenient pedestrian crossings?

Subordinate or Secondary Plans
– What secondary plans exist?
– When are they slated for review/renewal?
– What additional secondary plans would we recommend?

Infrastructure
– Is there a roads needs assessment being conducted?
– Are roads prioritized for maintenance? Is this an opportunity for incorporating cycling lanes?

Community Improvement Plans
– Are the following mentioned: sidewalks, lighting, community facilities, streetscaping, aesthetic/visual appearance, parks and recreation?

Phasing of Development
– Are there efforts to maintain links between existing areas of development?
– Are density targets mentioned or is there a plan in place to meet targets?
(for areas within the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan)

Parks
– Mention of day use and overnight parks?
– Links between parks (i.e. pathways)?
– Accommodation for biking/bikeways?
– There is a 5 per cent parkland designation required of developers. If the municipality is given cash in lieu, what happens to this money? Is this stated in the Official Plan?

Parking
– Is bike parking mentioned?
Definitions
Most Official Plans will include a section on definitions of various terms. Here is a list of words to check for and see how the plan defines them. Do their definitions match other commonly-accepted definitions? If terms appear in the plan and are not defined, can you recommend definitions?

- Affordable
- Community Improvement
- Development
- Health (Note: generally health seems to relate mostly to environmental health issues)
- Infilling
- Intensification
- Quality of Life
- Liveable Community
- Vibrant Community
- Community Safety Zones
- Trails