

Chudleigh column – July 07

Change and growth brings turmoil

Change defines our time.

Much of our society is muddled up in technological change, trying to make the best use of constantly changing standards in digital information exchange and adapting it to our real lives. Here in Halton we are also dealing with change of another sort.

Nothing, it seems is changing faster in Halton than the ground beneath our feet.

Only a few short years ago we could trust the continuity of our land, our landmarks, our roads, schools, sports facilities and the time it took to move through that landscape. Now it seems every day brings a new building, roadblocks, gridlock, and new ways of getting from here to there.

Back in the bad old days of Bob Rae's Ontario, Halton began to hatch a plan to bring water to the vast tracts of the Region which did not have access to it, fully aware that water would bring homes, people and change.

In Oakville and Burlington much of this new development was seen as merely an extension of already well developed urban areas. While some new infrastructure and facilities have been built, the amount of growth as a percentage of what already existed led local officials to believe that the jolt of change would affect only new residents. They were wrong.

In Milton, growth was denied for so long, that people had forgotten the impact that even modest growth would have on their small town. And Milton's growth has not been modest.

New residents of Oakville and Burlington are faced with a transportation network stitched together with so many rough fixes that it is almost unworkable. A trip that used to take 15 minutes now takes twice as long, thanks to inadequate arterial roads, numerous lights, and changing traffic volume.

In Milton, the old town, nestled under the shadow of the Niagara Escarpment, is virtually detached from the new areas which are inexorably drawn to the supposed bright lights of Mississauga. The old downtown area is increasingly orphaned from the town it spawned, as it is relegated to the extreme north-west corner of a Milton morphing into something entirely new.

Once all this growth was under way, the provincial Liberal government came to town, unrolled its scroll and decreed that Halton must grow faster and larger than intended by our town fathers, and that population densities in current urban areas must be intensified.

Our local officials seem to be resigned to this intensification. In fact they have gone cap in hand to the Liberal government and said if Queen's Park wants Halton to grow, then Queen's Park had better pony up the cash to build the necessary infrastructure.

I'd think that they should also shift their focus to slowing down the growth and return to allowing market forces to determine population densities of urban areas. I'm not against higher densities in urban cores where it makes sense, however I'm foursquare against forcing intensification by decree.

Additionally having big city bureaucrats in Toronto decide how Halton should look and feel is simply wrong.

It is time we returned sanity back into our growth plans. Planning is an inexact art given that it is practised in a very fluid environment. If we want to change the result we have to change the process.

The first step is unshackling our planning from provincial expectations and directives. The second is to include detailed demographic information in the planning process including developing commuting estimates and the age range of new inhabitants. That information alone will help tailor infrastructure requirements of schools, recreation facilities and roads in advance of growth.