

# Getting Out There: Making Ontario's Smarter Future Happen!



Gregor Beck

Smarter land-use planning and smarter government spending to protect nature, curb urban sprawl, and foster vibrant, health communities are not wild-eyed dreams. They can and must be the ingredients for creating a smarter, more viable and more sustainable future for Ontario. As shown over the past 30 years, in places such as some U.S. cities and in much of Europe, smarter planning is achievable and can improve overall quality of life.

In this community guide, we have explained the many and varied costs of urban sprawl to our society; we have presented smart growth as the solution to protecting nature and curbing sprawl; we have given you a toolbox full of ways to help make smart growth happen; we have made suggestions for organizing residents in your community into an effective voice for smart community planning; and we have presented Ontario Nature's vision for a smarter future for Ontario.

The smart-growth tools outlined in this guide can go a long way towards a smarter future for Ontario. However, the task will not be easy. Some experts estimate that we have less than a decade to turn around the current planning trends in Ontario if we are to have a chance of mitigating past damages to nature from urban sprawl and preventing further sprawl. This challenging task will require bold action by all levels of government, with the clear and united support of the Ontario public.

We have explained the many actions our governments need to take to ensure a smarter Ontario future. Will our municipal, provincial and federal governments jump into action, or might they need to be pushed? Never doubt that a gentle nudge – or a not-so-gentle shove – from the community can make important changes happen.

Together, we can make a difference. But who are *we*? We are not only environmental advocates and conservationists. To ensure a smarter future for Ontario, we need the talents and expertise of people from many walks of life: forward-thinking urban planners, environmental engineers, urban design specialists, farmers and politicians, as well as the urban development industry, affordable housing organizations, public transit advocacy groups and the business community – in short, everyone who has a stake in a smarter future for Ontario.

We must be realistic too, though. Let's not kid ourselves that making Ontario work smarter will be easy. There will be resistance. Some developers will reject the vision we have outlined in this guide for a smarter Ontario, since it may cut into their short-term profits or threaten their land-speculation strategies. To those developers, we say land speculation is a gamble that they take (hoping that inexpensive farmland today will become lucrative developments tomorrow), and gambling is a risky venture. To those developers who see the future in smart growth not as a threat but as an opportunity, we say, "Welcome aboard!"

Likewise, some urban residents may resent plans for intensification in designated growth areas (such as transit lines), either because tall buildings will block the sunshine they are accustomed to enjoying on their properties or because they fear that higher densities will lower their quality of life in some way. In fact, as we have tried to show in this guide, smart growth benefits us all, by eliminating the costs of sprawl and by revitalizing urban communities. But other people will still want to own a large home on a large suburban or rural lot, with no interest in breaking their addiction to driving their cars everywhere.

Clearly, there is a need to educate the public on the benefits of smarter communities. Public buy-in for a smarter Ontario future will be the key to making it happen. Our aim as advocates for smarter communities is to make these smarter cities and towns as irresistible as possible! Across North America, there is already tremendous community support for more creative ways of growing cities and towns that protect natural areas, preserve farmland, and enhance urban livability.

The basic ingredient for a smarter future for Ontario will be community-based smart-growth groups in cities and towns across the province. Not only can such groups help bring about smarter planning in their own communities, but they can help build a network of smart-growth groups

to work together at the provincial level. By promoting the smart-growth message as widely as possible, community groups can help bring about the broad change in thinking about our communities that is needed.

We must move quickly if we are to keep pace with expected population-growth trends. As the third-fastest-growing region in North America (behind Los Angeles and Atlanta), the Greater Toronto Area – and Ontario more broadly – needs to devise a smart-growth strategy for the short (1-5 years), medium (5-20 years) and long (20-50 years) terms. We hope that smart planning for 40-50 years or longer into the future will become the norm in Ontario.

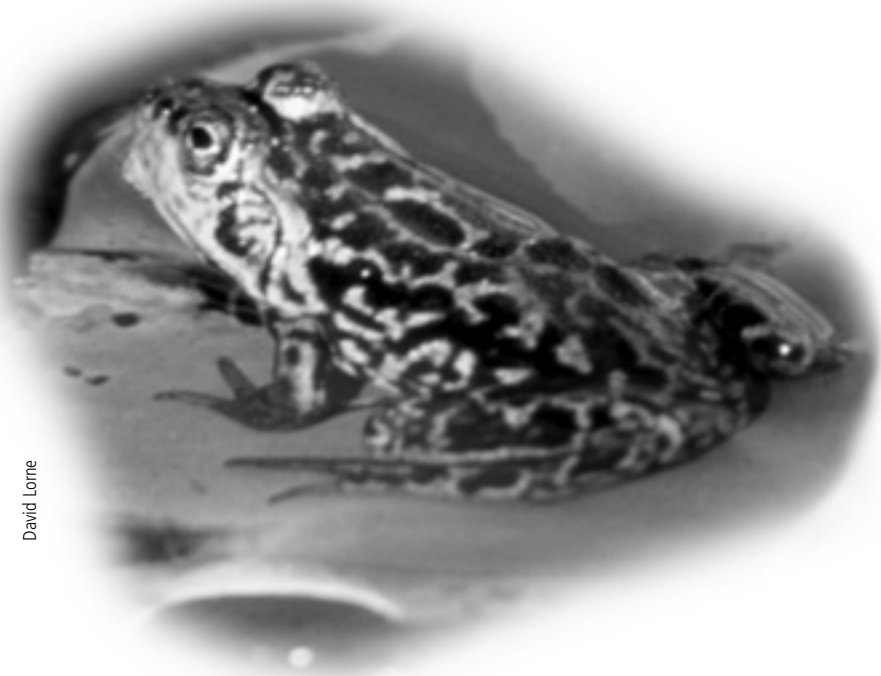
**You have an important role to play. We encourage you to:**

- Keep updated on Ontario Nature's smart-growth activities through our website at [www.ontarionature.org](http://www.ontarionature.org).
- Use this community guide to get the word out about smart growth and to organize residents to promote smart growth in your community.
- Ask as many people as possible to write the provincial government to demand smarter policies and programs.
- Host a community workshop about smart growth.
- Network with smart-growth groups from other communities to share experiences and strategies.
- Help Ontario Nature as we explore ways to promote smart growth by:
  - contacting the Ontario Smart Growth Network and the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (see Resources, page

- 71) for listserv and discussion forum opportunities;
- joining Ontario Nature's Advocates for Nature letter-writing program by registering on our website to become an on-line advocate;
- becoming a member of Ontario Nature and thereby helping strengthen Ontario's longest-serving conservation organization, with 25,000 members and over 135 member groups across Ontario working for smarter planning to protect nature;
- joining the Ontario Nature member group nearest to your community. That group may already be working on smarter-community initiatives and may want to work with you; and
- encouraging your group to become a member of the Ontario Smart Growth Network.

Alternatives to the way we grow our communities in Ontario are available and are crucial to the well-being of the province. Equally important, Ontarians like you have an important role to play in shaping the future of our communities and the legacy we leave to future generations. Whether theirs is a promising future depends very much on the actions we take today. Together, working for a common vision of a smarter Ontario, we can make that future a reality.

There is no second chance to create a smarter future for Ontario. We simply must get it right this time, for no one can create more natural areas or more farmland once they are destroyed. So go out *now* into your community and offer the best you can for a smarter future!



David Lorne