

CREATING “COMPLETE COMMUNITIES” THROUGH
COMMERCIAL LAND USE POLICY

By

Kelsey Prentice
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University of Western Ontario

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ABSTRACT

The Ontario government has provided little guidance for municipalities regarding planning for retail development, despite expecting their land use policies to achieve the goals of sustainable and complete communities mandated through provincial policies. This paper examines the evolution of commercial land use policy over the past twenty years, in order to describe how municipalities have been planning commercial retail development to meet the objectives of the Growth Plan. During this time period, a new form of retail emerged known as “power retail”. This new form of retail has disrupted land use planners’ mandate to maintain the planned function of commercial hierarchies. Case studies of three municipalities in York Region (Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham) reveal that commercial land use policy has moved away from creating a commercial retail hierarchy based on planned function and have instead established an urban structure based on a hierarchy of intensification areas.

Key words: commercial planning, suburban intensification, land use policy

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Introduction

The Ontario government has provided little guidance for municipalities regarding planning for retail development, despite expecting their land use policies to achieve the goals of sustainable and complete communities mandated through provincial policies. This ignores the important role that retail development plays in shaping a city's urban form, and how it relates to place-making initiatives, transportation planning and a thriving urban economy.

Over the past 20 years, new forms of retail have emerged in the Greater Toronto Area, most notably large-format stores located close to major highways, known as “power retail” (Buliung and Hernandez, 2009). These new retail forms have disrupted land use planners' mandate to maintain the planned function of commercial hierarchies. In the absence of provincial direction on retail planning, this paper will aim to answer the question, “How are urbanizing municipalities in York Region legislating retail development in the efforts to meet the objectives of the Growth Plan?”.

This question will be addressed through a review of commercial land use planning in York Region between 1994 and 2015. This time period was chosen as it covers the decade prior to the Growth Plan (2006), in which the majority of power retail development occurred in York Region, and the ten years following the Growth Plan in which municipalities are required to plan for compact, mixed-use and complete communities. Additionally, this coincides with the on-going provincial land-use policy review, which evaluates the effectiveness of provincial land use plans in achieving their prescribed goals.

Case studies of three urbanizing municipalities in York Region (Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham) reveal that commercial land use policy has moved away from creating a commercial retail hierarchy based on a planned function and have placed more emphasis on the built form of the development. Instead of planning an explicit retail hierarchy based on planning function, municipalities are planning a hierarchy of

intensification areas. This coincides with a greater shift in the planning field away from single-use planning to mixed-use or “integrated” planning.

Literature Review

The Commercial hierarchy

The commercial hierarchy concept has influenced commercial land use planning over the past fifty years. Geographers have described a typology of commercial development, while planners have used the concept of a commercial hierarchy to guide land use policies.

The planning principle argument for using planning policy to protect the planned function of an existing retail use or centre is to avoid significant urban blight and provide an adequate range of goods and services. Planners use the concept of “commercial hierarchy” to “control excessive commercial construction and competition” (Hernandez and Simmons, 2006, p. 467). The basic argument for planning retail is that a system of centres arranged in a hierarchy provides an efficient way for arranging the distribution, collection and administration of goods and services. This avoids duplication and waste and provides social benefits from economies of scale. Planned commercial development is designated to serve a specific market, level of traffic determined by transportation capacity and this establishes the market size and scale (City of Vaughan, 1998).

Urban geographers use the term “retail structure” to describe the various retail forms of an urban area and how they influence and are impacted by the global economy, legislation and cultural change (Jones and Doucet, 2001). Existing academic research on retail focuses on identifying the economic and societal forces that have contributed to the emergence of the current retail structure and how it might develop in the near future. Simmons (2012) describes the typologies of retail through a case study of the retail structure of Toronto. The different types of retail developed over a sequence of four stages; traditional, planned shopping centres, power retail, and the emerging e-commerce market. Each type of retail development emerged from a specific time period, and remains a part of the existing retail retail structure of the city.

The “traditional” stage describes retail strips with small shops and independent family businesses. Traditional retail develops when there is access to pedestrian customers and public transit systems determines accessibility. This stage was identified by Berry (1963) and others interested in “central place systems”, meaning the relationships between the quantity and variety of local retail and the population and income they serve (Hernandez & Simmons, 2006).

Planned shopping centres emerged post World War II, when years of prosperity led to the widespread purchase of automobiles and suburban growth supported by investments in highways. Planned shopping centres absorbed the expansion of retail activity during this period. This retail format was highly structured, with planners and developers establishing a commercial hierarchy based on the size of the site and the anchor tenant (Simmons, 2012).

Power retail emerged in the 1990’s to challenge planning policies and the existing retail hierarchy (Hernandez and Simmons, 2006). There are three elements of power retail: 1) big box stores 2) the big box chain retailers that operate big box stores 3) planned clusters of big box stores known as power centres and 4) unplanned clusters of power centres. This new retail form began with the entry of big box U.S. retailers into the Canadian marketplace. The big box concept consists of building a large, but inexpensive store offering low prices and ample parking (Buiung and Hernandez, 2009).

Power Retail in the Greater Toronto Area

The proliferation of “power retailing” and the emergence of “power nodes” has dramatically altered the retail structure of the Greater Toronto Area, resulting in land use patterns that are incompatible with the goals and vision of the Ontario government’s land use policies. “Power retail” describes a retail form that emerged in the Greater Toronto Area during the 1990’s and is distinct from previous forms of retail development (traditional retail strips in inner cities and suburban shopping centres) (Buliung and Hernandez, 2009; Simmons, 2014).

Power retail is comprised of three different concepts; big box stores, power centres and power nodes. Big box stores are retail outlets that are generally three or more times the size other comparable stores and are sometimes called “destination” retailers or “category-killers”, because they offer a wide selection of the same type of items, allowing customers to comparison shop in one single store, rather than having to comparison shop at a variety of different stores (Buliung and Hernandez 2009). Power centres describe shopping centres with three or more big box stores with a shared parking lot and some other smaller retailers (Hernandez, et al., 2007). Power nodes have one or more power centres with other big box stores or shopping centres within a one kilometer radius (Yeates, 2000). Power nodes typically develop near a major highway interchange (Buliung and Hernandez, 2009).

Power retail development emerged as a disruptive force in the in the commercial hierarchy of the Greater Toronto Area beginning in the 1990s. Jones and Doucet (2000; 2001) were the first researchers to address the emergence of “new format” or big box retail in the GTA. This research examined the spatial and structural impacts of big-box retailing using the databases of the Centre for the Study of Commercial Activity and concluded that big box retail had changed the spatial distribution of retail and entertainment. Hernandez and Simmons (2006) describe the “power retail” phenomenon and define the four key concepts that comprise power retail; big box stores, power retail, power centres and power nodes. This research tracks spatial distribution of power retail is across Canada and discusses the locational preferences of these new commercial clusters.

Buliung and Hernandez (2009) explore the relationship between power retail and high-level land-use policies in their report published by the Neptis foundation. This comprehensive study on power retailing in the GTA examined the spatial evolution of commercial development across the GTA between 1996 and 2006 using geographical statistics. The study found that within nine years the number of big box stores had doubled, and that these developments had clustered as power centres and nodes in suburban areas, taking advantage of low location costs where nearby highways make it

easy to draw regional customers. The researchers concluded that power retail had implications for regional planning as power nodes drew consumers on a regional scale, and that further research is needed into the travel behavior of shoppers and how this could influence infrastructure needs.

Simmons (2012) conducted a case study on the evolution of the GTA's commercial structure and explained the economic and societal factors behind the dramatic increase in power retail and power retail's role within the retail economy of the GTA. Developers and retailers build this form of retail because the buildings are cheap, the location and labour costs are low and the retailer is able to offer consumers low prices. Simmons (2012) points out that compared to previous forms of retail (the traditional retail street and shopping centres), power retail is much more "unplanned". Power centres typically have few amenities, no links between stores and no relationship with public transit.

In terms of built form, existing research on power centres has found that their "open environment" (as opposed to an enclosed mall) has changed the way that customers move through these shopping centres. Power retail provides few amenities compared to enclosed shopping malls (little seating, washrooms and no security). While planned shopping malls encourage pedestrian movement throughout the centre, and are typically integrated with public transit systems, power centres have little consideration for pedestrian movement and access to transit (Lord and Bodkin, 1996; Bodkin and Lord, 1997; Wang, et al. 2000; Lorch, 2005).

The emergence of power retail in the mid 1990's has been connected to the implementation free-trade agreements such as NAFTA, the decline of the value of the Canadian dollar, the growth in new residential subdivisions and innovation in the design of site selection of retail sites (Hernandez and Simmons, 2006; Jones and Doucet, 2000). Free-trade agreements allowed US retailers into the Canadian market, with businesses strategies that prompted different consumer behavior. Importantly, the growth of power centres between 1996 and 2006 was driven by the growth in new residential subdivisions (Jones and Doucet, 2000). Retail was not available to serve these new communities, and the low-cost land and large parcels of land available for

development were ideal for developers who wanted to make their stores accessible for the auto-oriented surrounding community.

The “retail sprawl” and accompanying consumer mobility patterns that the Greater Toronto Area has experienced for the past 20 years has implications for the organization of the region. More than ever before, consumers are willing to travel farther for cheaper prices and are aided by highway infrastructure. Planners objective is to maintain controlled commercial competition within a commercial hierarchy has been undermined by retail locations in distant locations, including other jurisdictions (Hernandez and Simmons, 2006). Despite the impact of consumer mobility patterns, regional transportation plans do not address the impact of power nodes on the regional transportation system.

Policy Context

The province of Ontario has a prescriptive top-down land-use planning system, with the province directing how municipalities should be developed through legislation, Provincial Policy Statements, and provincial land-use plans. The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006), the Greenbelt Plan (2005) and the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan (2001) are provincial land use plans that direct growth within the municipalities chosen as case studies.

The province’s first policies specifically relating to retail development were introduced in the 1970’s. The Guidelines for Shopping Centre Development (1975) addressed the market impacts of the operation of shopping centres. These early policies recognized that retail development had to be viewed with respect to its role in the community and the need to support downtown and older retail strips. Incentive programs in support of downtowns (such as the Business Improvement Area programs) were introduced under these policies (York Region, 2015).

The Provincial Policy Statement (1997) represented a shift in provincial policy related to commercial land use development. Previously existing policies had focused on how new commercial developments may impact the existing commercial hierarchy of a community, in order to protect the planned function of the existing hierarchy. In the new approach introduced through the PPS (1997), commercial development is considered one component of “community building” and long with other types of development, must result in “efficient” and “cost-effective” land use patterns.

Provincial Policy Statement

The current Provincial Policy Statement (2014) does not provide any policies specific to commercial development. The Provincial Policy Statements following 1997 have provided general directions on community development rather than direction related to specific forms of development. These general directions include supporting land use and development patterns that promote a compact form and a structure of nodes and corridors and the use of active transportation and transit.

Sections of the PPS (2014) that are important for retail development:

- Conversion of employment areas to non-employment uses may only be permitted through a comprehensive review (Section 1.3.2).
 - This is related to retail development as many big-box developments were taking place on converted employment lands.
- Long-Term Economic Prosperity should be supported by “maintaining and, where possible, enhancing the vitality and viability of downtowns and mainstreets” (Section 1.7).
- Energy Conservation, Air Quality and Climate Change supports development patterns which, a) promote compact form and a structure of nodes and corridors; b) promote the use of active transportation and transit in and between residential, employment (including commercial and industrial) and institutional uses and other areas; c) focus major employment, commercial and other travel-intensive land uses on sites which are well-served by transit where this exists or is to be

developed, or designing these to facilitate the establishment of transit in the future” (Section 1.8).

Growth Plan

The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006) doesn’t provide any direction specifically related to retail development, but places emphasis on encouraging the development *compact* and *complete* communities. Policy 2.2.2.1 describes the concept of complete communities as communities that have “a diverse mix of land uses, a range and mix of employment and housing types, high quality public open space and easy access to local stores and services” (MPIR, 2006, 13). *Compact urban form* is defined as “a land use pattern that encourages efficient use of land, walkable neighbourhoods, mixed land uses (residential, retail, workplace and institutional all within one neighbourhood), proximity to transit and reduced need for infrastructure.

While the provincial concepts of complete communities and compact urban form include retail, the Plan provides more detailed targets related to residential and employment than retail and services. For instance, the Plan provides a definition for “major office” (which should be directed to Urban Growth Centres), but no definition for “major retail” (Province of Ontario, 2006).

The only retail development issue that the province has addressed is the development of large-format retail on lands designated for employment uses. Section 2.2.6.5 states that proposed conversions of employment lands to non-employment uses require a municipal comprehensive review and Major Retail is not considered an employment use.

Relevant sections:

- Encourage the development of “*complete communities* with a diverse mix of land uses, a range and mix of employment and housing types, high quality public open space and easy access to local stores and service” (Section 2.2.2 h).

- Promote economic development by “providing an appropriate mix of employment uses including industrial, commercial and institutional uses to meet long-term needs” (Section 2.2.6.2).
- Conversion of employment lands to non-employment uses is permitted through a municipal comprehensive review. Major Retail uses are considered non-employment uses (Section 2.2.6.5).
- New development in greenfield areas will be “planned, designated, zones and designed in a manner that, “a) contributes to creating complete communities [...] C) provides a diverse mix of land uses, including residential and employment uses, to support vibrant neighbourhoods...” (Section 2.7.1).

Other Provincial Direction

In 2008, the Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal released a paper entitled, “Planning for Employment in the Greater Golden Horseshoe”. This discussion paper expressed concern at the development of power centres clustered along major highways, explaining, “better planning for retail activities will not only help to take advantage of the opportunities for more vibrant, complete communities, but it will also help to protect important employment lands that are better suited to other types of economic activities” (Province of Ontario, 2008, Section 5.4). Municipalities were advised to be clear in their official plans about which employment areas may include retail uses, in order to avoid losing these lands to major retail developments. The paper was meant to solicit feedback from stakeholders in order to develop guidelines to support better planning for retail activities, including:

- proactively planning for the appropriate location and design of major retail, including large-format retail
- overcoming barriers to mixed-use retail developments in intensification areas

As of March 2016, no guidelines regarding retail development have been released by the province.

Ontario Municipal Board

The decisions of the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) have influenced municipal retail policy. The OMB is a quasi-judicial administrative tribunal where stakeholders can appeal municipal land-use planning outcomes. The OMB adjudicates these disputes and has the power to change municipal planning decisions. The decisions of the Board are based on the planning arguments and evidence presented for each case, and these decisions are not based on precedent. However, OMB decisions still exert influence over municipal policy language.

In decisions regarding the commercial development, the OMB's assessments are based on the Province's initial policies regarding commercial development, instituted by the 1975 Guidelines for Shopping Centre Development. Proposed commercial development should be assessed based on its market impact on the local planned commercial structure. Decisions made in the 1990's proved that the test for intervention into the market was significant. The Board would only intervene when the market impact would be "deleterious or harmful" to existing facilities to the extent that the development would "jeopardize" or "undermine or destroy" the proper planned function of existing land uses (Webber and Hernandez, 2016).

Recent studies on the influence of the OMB has demonstrated that the decision-making process has influenced big-box planning outcomes (Webber and Hernandez, 2016). In a study of 65 large-format retail appeals, it was found that some appeals are used as a tool to conduct negotiations rather than contest municipal decisions. When a proponent appeals a decision by a municipality, the municipality is under greater pressure to come to the agreement at the pre-hearing stage in order to avoid an expensive and lengthy trial. This process gives proponents the upper hand, as they typically have more resources and thus are less concerned about avoiding a hearing.

Case Studies

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of commercial land use policies of municipalities in York Region between 1995 and 2015. A case study approach was chosen, which allows for the in depth examination of a few cases over a duration of time. This approach is particularly useful in the field of planning, where issues are only understandable within their particular geographical, political and social context.

Case studies were conducted on three municipalities in York Region; Vaughan, Markham and Richmond Hill. These municipalities were chosen for several reasons: 1) they were the site of enormous growth in commercial and residential development over the past thirty years; 2) they are subject to provincial policies which require them to change the pattern of their development 3); they will continue to experience enormous growth, including a significant amount of intensification (Growth Outlook for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2005).

These case studies are informed by content analysis of land-use policy documents, specifically municipal Official Plans, staff reports and commercial land use studies. Content analysis is a technique of qualitative data analysis, which involves examining information in written or symbolic materials. Material is reviewed to analyze and create a system for recording specific aspects of it. The data is organized into categories on the basis of themes, concepts or patterns. Using these findings, the researcher develops new concepts, formulates conceptual definitions and examines the relationship among concepts (Neuman and Robson, 2012).

The content analysis performed for these case studies involved background research on commercial retail planning in Ontario, an initial review of all policy documents to gain an overall understanding of what policy exists, and a subsequent in-depth review which involved comparing the policy approaches of different municipalities. It is during this in-

depth review that policy themes were identified in these documents. These themes were informed by background research on commercial retail planning in Ontario, as well as the policy discussions in the commercial land use studies which informed these policies.

The following case studies will describe the context of each municipality, a brief description of their commercial structure, a detailed description of their commercial policy between 1995 and 2015 and a summary of their commercial policy approach based on content analysis.

York Region

Context

The Regional Municipality of York is located north of the City of Toronto and extends to Lake Simcoe and Holland Marsh. It is part of the broader Greater Golden Horseshoe where over six million people live and work (Figure 1). York Region is comprised of nine local municipalities and has a population of just over 1 million. The Region out-performs the Ontario average in the areas of post-secondary educational attainment, household income and average employment rate (Statistics Canada, 2012).

While the Region began as a collection of bedroom communities serving the City of Toronto, it has since evolved into a diverse urban region and a major centre for economic activity in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The Region is experiencing a period of rapid growth that began in the 1990s and is expected to continue past 2041 (York Region, 2014). This growth will be directed by provincial land use plans, such as the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006), the Greenbelt Plan (2005), the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan (2001). Additionally, the Region will be recipient of significant investment in public transit, as outlined in Metrolinx's the Big Move (2008).

The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006) identified four Urban Growth Centres (UGC) within York Region. These UGCs (designated as Regional Centres in

the York Region Official Plan), will be a “focal area of investment for institutional and region-wide public services, as well as commercial, recreational, cultural and entertainment uses” and will be planned to achieve minimum gross density targets by 2031 (York Region, 2010, Section 5.4.19). Three of these Urban Growth Centres are located within local municipalities that are used as case studies in this paper; Markham Centre, Richmond Hill/Langstaff Gateway and Vaughan Corporate Centre (Figure 2). All of these UGCs currently have power centres in use within their boundary, or major power nodes in close proximity (Figure 4).

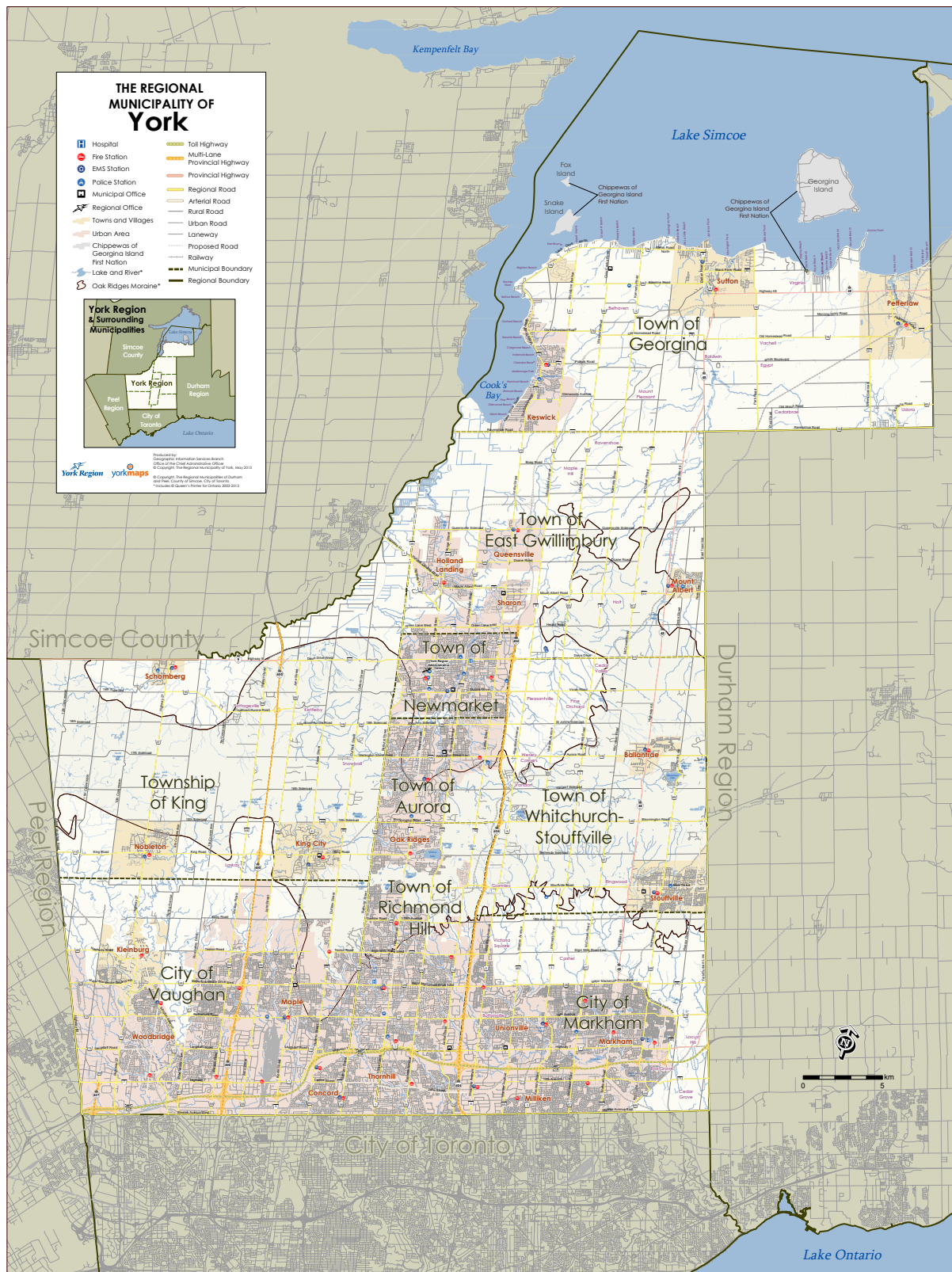


Figure 1: York Region Basemap (YorkMaps, 2012).

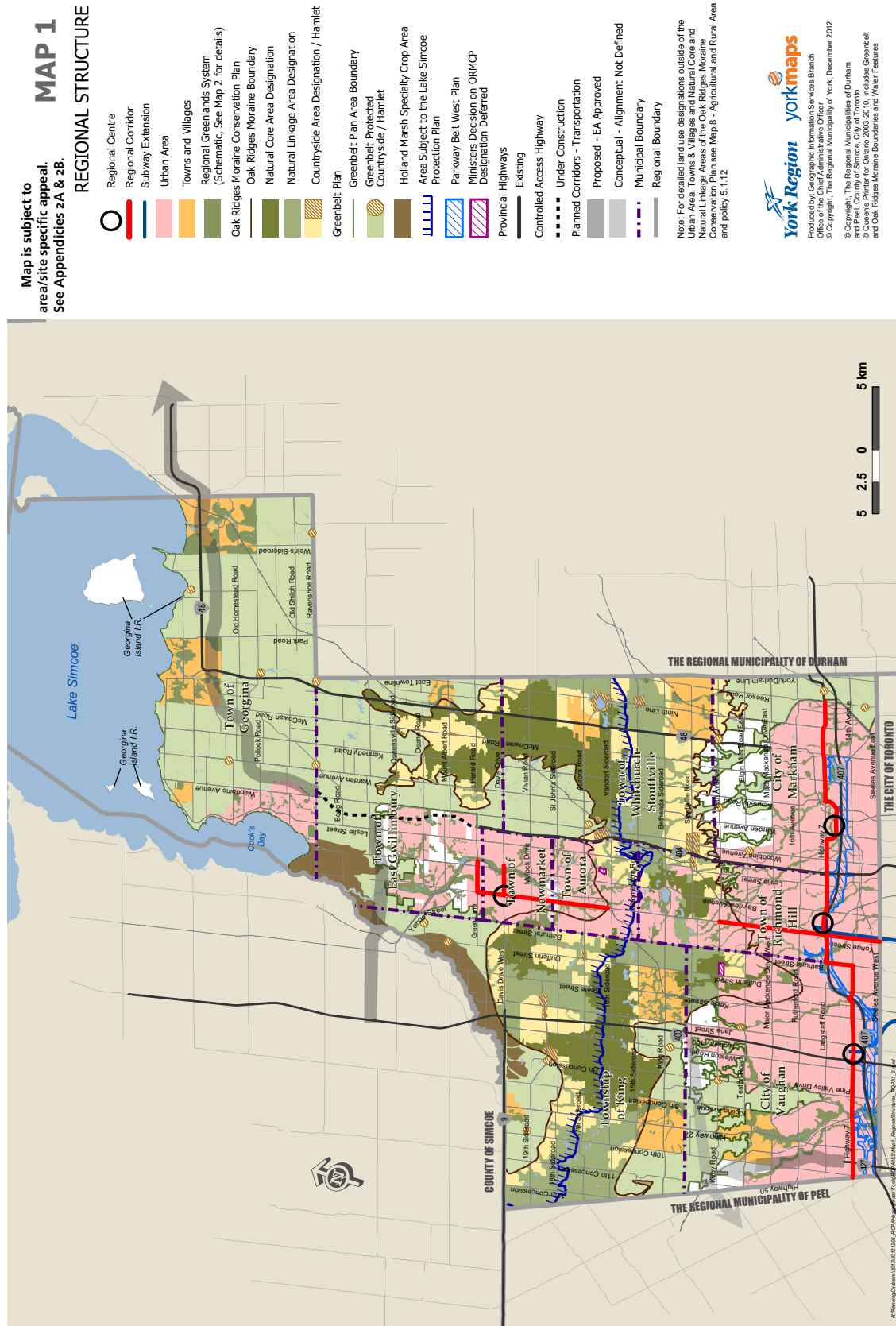


Figure 2: York Region Regional Structure (York Region, 2010).

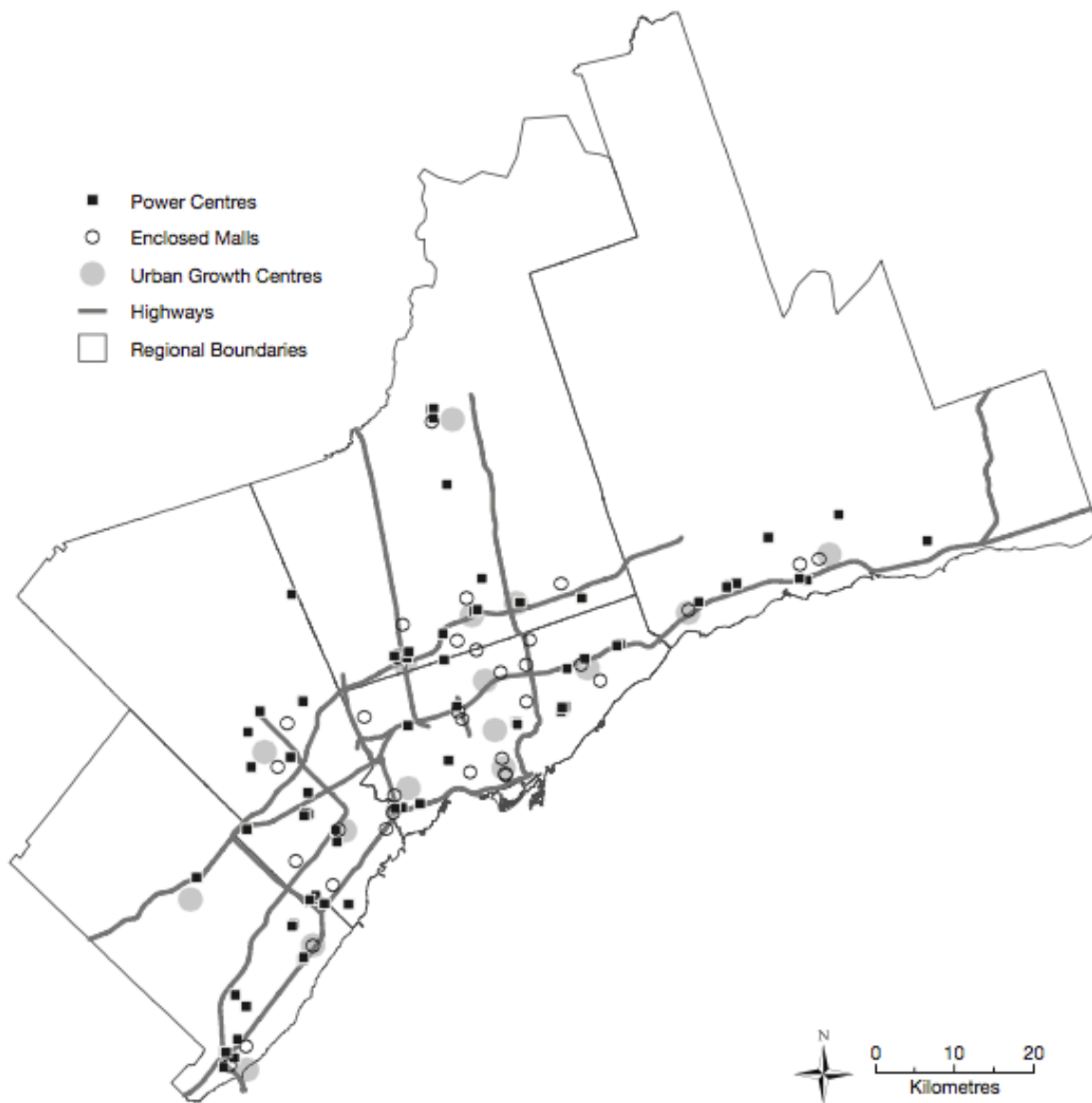


Figure 3: Power Centres and Urban Growth Centres (Building and Hernandez, 2009).

Commercial Structure

York Region's commercial retail network consists of 34.7 million square feet of retail space and 10,500 retail and service businesses (York Region, 2015).

The highest order shopping centres and retail nodes are located in Vaughan, Richmond Hill, Markham and Newmarket. Most of these nodes are located within or in the vicinity

of the Region's Centres and Corridors and the 400 series highways. Super-regional nodes include:

- Markville Shopping Centre in Markham,
- Upper Canada Mall node in Newmarket/East Gwillimbury
- Highway 400 and Highway 7 in Vaughan and Vaughan Mills.

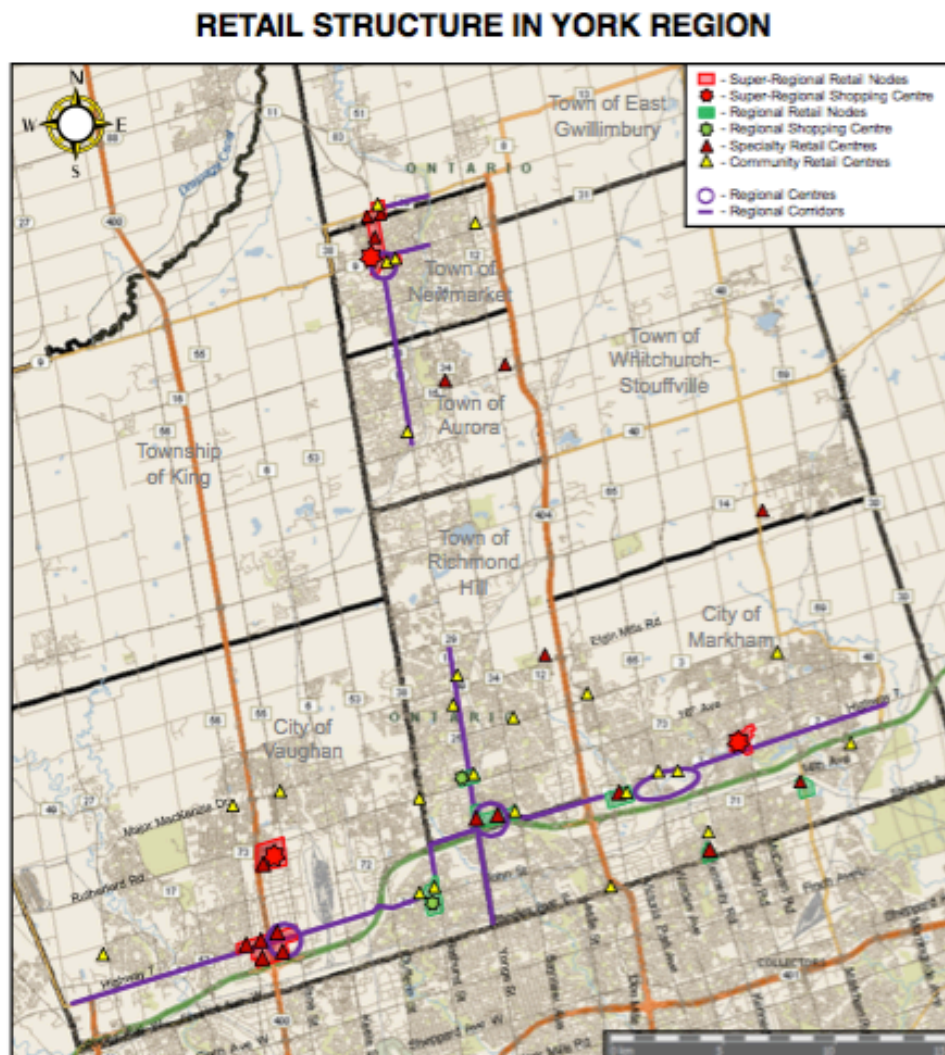


Figure 4: Retail Structure in York Region (York Region, 2015)

Commercial Policy Overview 1994-2016

York Region 1994 Official Plan

The 1994 was organized into three themes, that were based on York Region's 1993 Strategic Plan, Vision 2021: Sustainable Natural Environment, Economic Vitality and Healthy Communities. Commercial uses are mentioned under the theme Economic Vitality, and area municipalities are directed to place an emphasis on "community and design" (York Region, 1994, Section 3.3.7). A review of the 1994 Official Plan reveals two themes related to commercial development: protecting the existing urban and commercial structure and and emphasis on urban design elements, such as the location of parking areas, the relationship of buildings to the street and the integration of pedestrian systems in the development.

Existing urban and commercial structure

- There is a need to ensure that regionally significant retail facilities are designed and located in such a way to serve the needs of residents while *not detracting* from existing and proposed urban centres, mainstreets and the proposed community structure of this plan (Section 3.3).

Urban Design

- Area municipalities should be encouraged to plan for retail facilities as part of communities with an emphasis on *community* and *design*. The following should be considered; a) the meshing of the proposals street grid and pedestrian system into the community, b) the mix of residential and office land uses, c) the integration of parks, natural areas and public spaces d) the relationship of the buildings to the street e) the distribution of floor space densities across the site and f) the avoidance of large expanses of parking areas (Section 3.3.7).

York Region 2010 Official Plan

The 2010 York Region Official Plan provides more direction related to retail development than the 1994 Official Plan. A review of the OP reveals four prominent

themes: integration of retail into communities, quality urban design, the intensification and redevelopment of existing retail and an emphasis on ensuring development is transit-oriented and walkable.

Integration of Retail, Transit-oriented and walkable, and Urban design

- Planning for Retail Objective: To ensure that retail is well-designed and appropriately integrated into communities in a manner that encourages walking, cycling and transit (Section 4.4).
- To require that retail be designed to be walkable, transit-supportive and integrated into communities and pedestrian cycling networks, with high-quality urban design (Section 4.4.1.).

Intensification and Redevelopment, and Urban design

- To work with local municipalities to improve urban design in new retail developments and to identify opportunities for the intensification and revitalization of existing retail (Section 4.4.2).
- That major retail sites should be designated to support redevelopment or retrofitting (Section 4.4.7).

Review of Commercial Land Use Policies 2015

As part of the Region's Official Plan review and update, the Region is development an approach to guide local municipalities on planning for retail development. The Region aims to "shift the market" from low-density and auto-oriented commercial development to more compact, mixed-use forms (York Region, 2015). Tate Economic Research and Macaulay Shiomi Howson Ltd were hired to conduct a Retail Trends Study, which included:

- 1) an overview of the retail sector in York Region;
- 2) assessment of opportunities and constraints of mixed-use, compact retail development in the Region's Centres and Corridors and new communities
- 3) assessment of land budget approaches for recommending retail uses and;

- 4) recommendations on tools to guide retail development in support of the policy objectives of the Regional Official Plan, the Growth Plan and the Provincial Policy Statement.

The report found that the greatest potential for compact and mixed-use commercial development exists within the Region's Centres and Corridors (Regional Centres/Urban Growth Centres). These areas provide the necessary location characteristics, such as access, visibility, mobility and proximity to a sizable market to achieve the high land values necessary for mixed use and dense development. Outside of the Centres and Corridors, opportunities for mixed use development are currently limited due to the supply characteristics of the existing retail network, auto-oriented transportation network, slow growth of high density residential and employment areas, and the availability of greenfield sites for commercial development.

The report concluded that York Region has a strong policy framework that encourages compact, mixed-use forms of commercial development. However, the Region must look beyond policy to support this type of development. An "implementation toolbox" was outlined, which included:

- minor policy modifications at Regional and local levels
- community improvement plans
- expedited planning/development processes
- zoning/development permit strategies
- parking strategies

The report observed that a "shift" towards mixed use development can already be seen the development at Markham Centre and Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, and it is anticipated that future mixed use development will also occur in the Region's Centres and Corridors.

Overview

Over the past twelve years, York Region has had two iterations of its Official Plan, the 1994 Official Plan that is pre-Growth Plan and the 2010 Official Plan which was adopted

four years after the Growth Plan. As Regional Official Plans, they provide broad direction for the planning of communities rather than specific directions, which can be found in lower tier municipal official plans.

The 1994 Official Plan focused on how the design of commercial developments integrates them into the community. The 2010 Official Plan also prioritizes the integration of retail into the community and provides further direction related to commercial development regarding intensification and redevelopment of existing retail, and ensuring that developments are walkable and transferable.

From the 1994 Official Plan to the 2010 Official Plan, there has been a continued emphasis on ensuring quality urban design of commercial development. While the 1994 Official Plan provides specific elements of site design to consider (for example, relationship of buildings to the street), the 2010 Official Plan does not outline these specific elements. Instead, the 2010 Official Plan simply directs that retail should incorporate “effective urban design” to ensure the “integration of retail into the community” (York Region, 2010, Section 4.4). Detail on specific site design elements may have been omitted in order to allow lower-tier municipalities to greater freedom in what they consider a well-designed commercial development would look like.

Vaughan

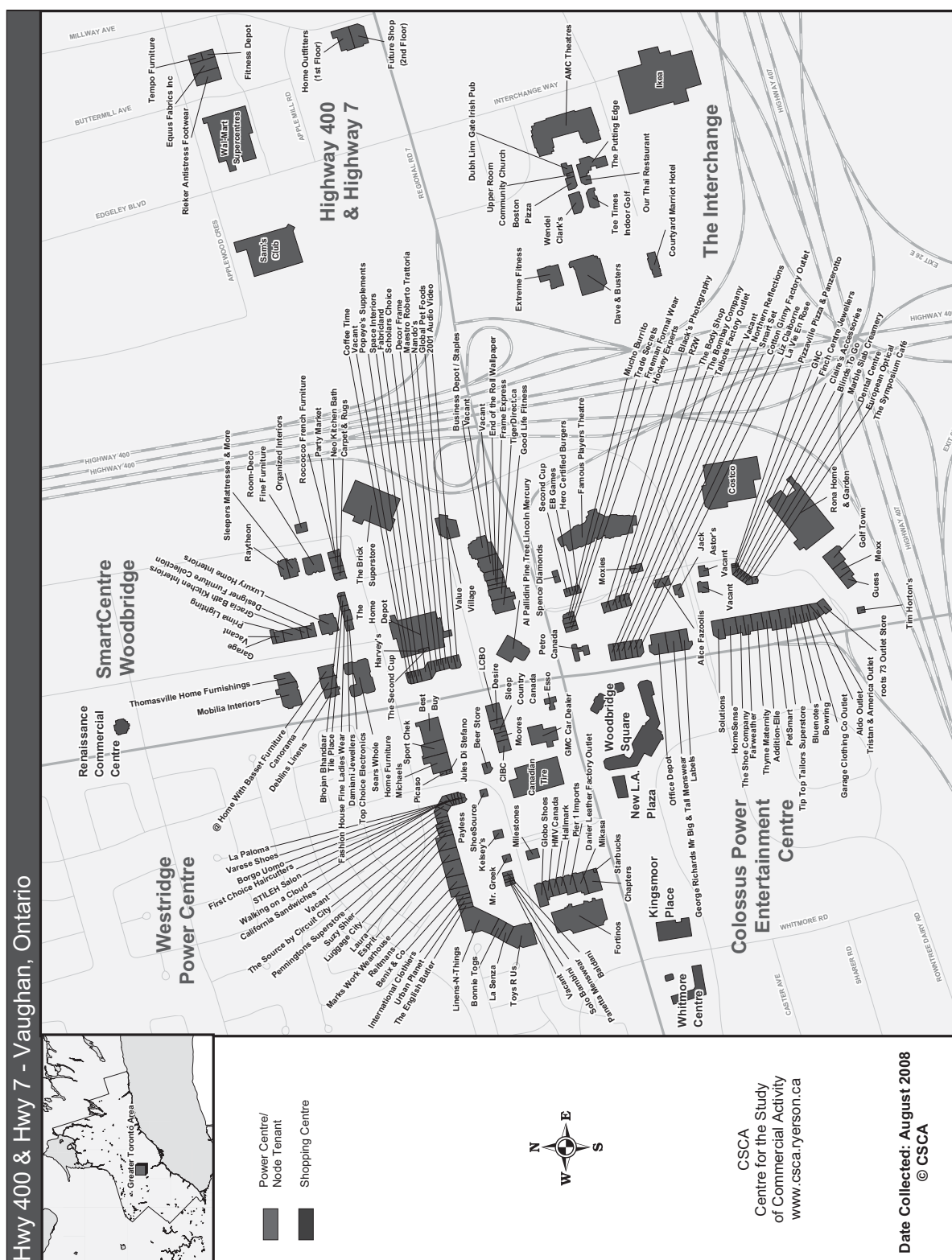
Context

The City of Vaughan is located in the south-western end of the Region and has a population of approximately 288,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2012). The City of Vaughan originated from a collection of rural villages; Woodbridge, Kleinburg, Maple and Thornhill. These villages, as well as smaller communities were incorporated in 1974 to create the Town of Vaughan. After the expansion of water and sewer services in the 1970's Vaughan experienced an explosion of growth. Between 1971 and 1991, the population grew from 15,000 to over 100,000. Throughout the 1990's the City continued

to grow at a rapid rate and became a major centre of economic activity (City of Vaughan, 2010b).

As per the York Region Official Plan, Vaughan is planning to accommodate twenty-nine percent (29%) of the Regional population growth and thirty-three percent (33%) of the Region's employment growth, resulting in approximately 167,300 new residents and 103,900 new between 2006 and 2031 (York Region, 2010). The Province has designated the core of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre (VMC) as an Urban Growth Centre (UGC). The VMC is located along the Highway 7 rapid transit corridor and at the terminus of the Toronto-York subway. Growth within the Urban Growth Centre is planned to meet or exceed the requirements for a density of 200 people and jobs per hectare as set out in the Growth Plan (2006) and the York Region Official Plan (2010). The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is subject to a secondary plan and a Community Improvement Plan (City of Vaughan, 2015).

The lands planned for the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre (VMC) are currently housing a power node made up of four different power centres; Westbridge Power Centre, SmartCentre, Colossus Power Entertainment Centre, the Interchange and Highway 400 & Highway 7 (Figure 5). These commercial uses were developed gradually between 1995 and 2005.



Commercial Structure

In 2010, the City of Vaughan retained urbanMetrics to conduct a Commercial Land Use Review as part of its Official Plan Review (City of Vaughan, 2010a). This review included an inventory of Vaughan's commercial structure.

This report identified unique attributes of Vaughan's Commercial Structure; a large tourist market, historic village cores, a large proportion of independent retailers, a wide range of culinary options and its position as a regional retail centre.

Major retail nodes were identified and classified into six commercial node type: super regional, regional, district, village core, local and arterial.

Super Regional nodes that draw consumers from across the GTA

- Power Centre Node at the intersection of Highway 400 and Highway 7
- Vaughan Mills Mall at Rutherford Road and Highway 400

The commercial inventory study conducted in 2009 found that Vaughan had 14.2 million square feet of commercial space.

Commercial Nodes in the City of Vaughan

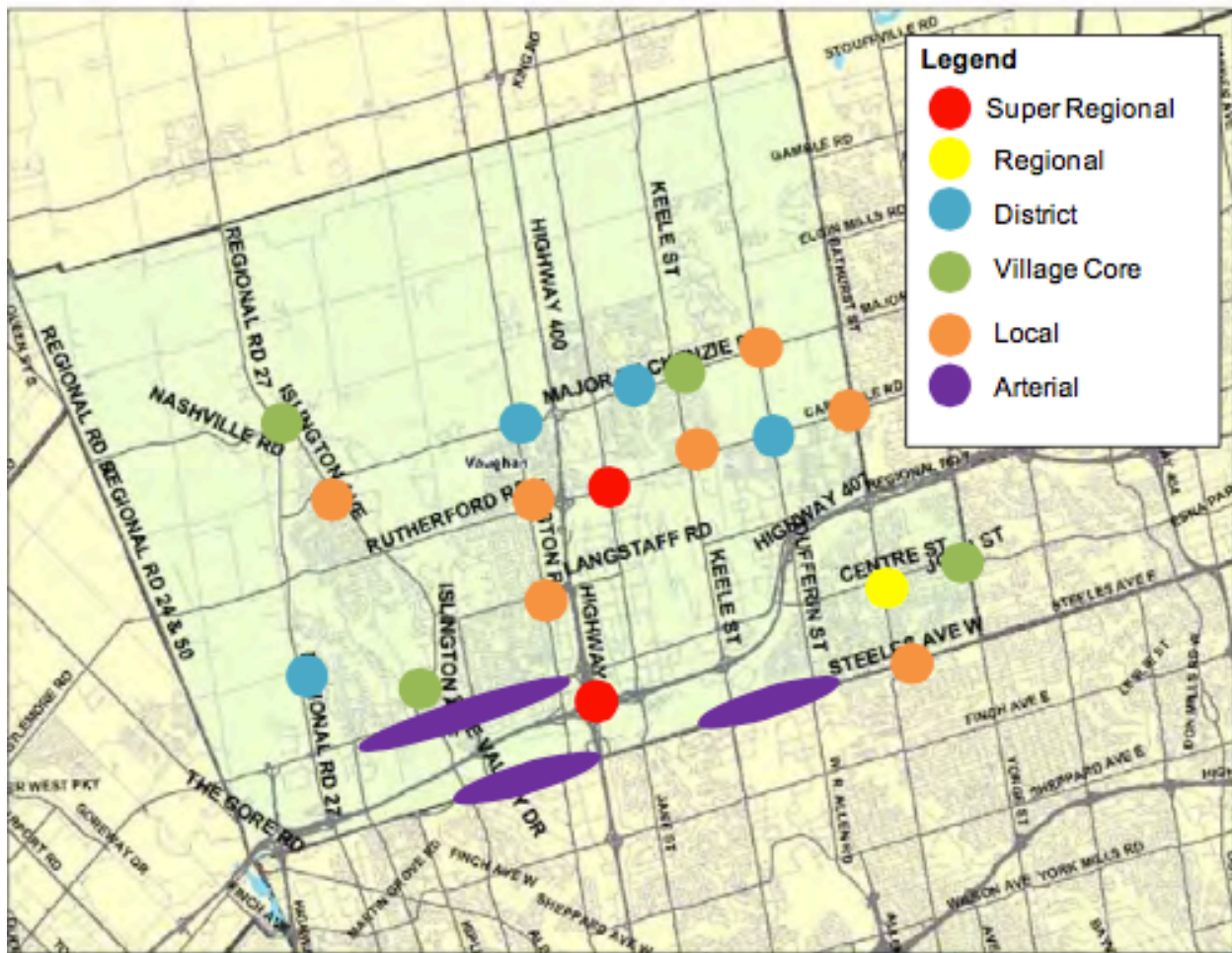


Figure 6: Commercial Nodes in the City of Vaughan (City of Vaughan, 2009)

Commercial Land Use Policy Overview 1995-2016

Official Plan Amendments 400 (1995)

Vaughan's commercial hierarchy was first shaped by OPA 400, which was approved by the province in 1995. OPA 400 provided a comprehensive framework to guide the development of three new communities (Vellore, Carrville and the Woodbridge Expansion Area). These policies were guided by a Retail Planning Study conducted in 1993 and 1994 by Stamm Economic Research. OPA 400 laid out a retail hierarchy that allowed commercial uses to locate within medium and high density.

Official Plan Amendment 500 (1998)

Vaughan Corporate Centre Plan (OPA 500) was approved in 1998 and recognized the centre as the highest order uses in the City's commercial hierarchy. It was also identified in the Regional Official Plan as a Regional Centre, and a focus for residential, institutional and business activities. The Vaughan Corporate Centre secondary plan overlaps with what is now the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. At the time that this plan was adopted, a significant portion of the secondary plan area was already developed or approved for development for big box retail uses, new industrial business parks and mature industrial uses. The Vaughan Corporate Centre secondary plan set out a vision for this area as a was to be based on principles that support "transit use, compact urban form and an integration of land uses" (City of Vaughan, 1998, Section 2.2). This was supported and updated in OPA 600.

Official Plan Amendment 600 (2001)

Vaughan's commercial structure was defined by OPA 600 (Part B Section 4.2.2) which identified seven groups which form a hierarchy of uses. This hierarchy of uses was based on the servicing needs of residents. For example, neighbourhood commercial centres were to address the weekly needs of residents, while local convenience commercial uses address the day-to-day convenience needs of residents (City of Vaughan, 2001, Section 2.3. viii.; Section 2.3.ix).

The predominant themes in these policies were the establishment and protection the commercial structure, and the promotion quality urban design;

Protection of the Commercial Structure

- To establish a hierarchy of commercial areas and facilities of various sizes and compositions to satisfy the needs of Vaughan residents and the traveling public (Section 2.3.i).
- To foster the role and economic vitality of established commercial areas within Vaughan (Section 2.3.ii).

Urban Design

- To promote shopping districts that cater to and encourage pedestrian traffic, and are characterized by distinctive building forms and specialty goods and services (Section 2.3.v)
- To provide within the primary commercial areas of each urban village [...] and to ensure that the areas are developed in accordance with sound principles of urban design and in particular are well integrated with adjacent land uses (Section 2.3.vii).

Commercial Land Use Review (2009)

In 2009, a Commercial Land Use Review was completed as part of the Official Plan Review. The review concluded that the existing commercial policies are appropriate given demographic and market trends, which allow for higher density development and a mix of uses in some areas. The policy recommendations provided were related to incorporating commercial retail into mixed-use development and improving the urban design and siting of commercial development. General policy recommendations for encouraging intensification in commercial development included;

- incorporating retailing in intensification sites,
- ensuring there are pedestrian connections to transit nodes,
- mid-block pedestrian connections to facilitate connectivity,
- a mix of commercial spaces,
- accommodation for large food stores,
- on-street parking to support street front retailing, and;
- building scale and orientation to ensure sunlight penetration onto pedestrian corridors.

Official Plan 2010

The 2010 Vaughan Official Plan incorporates the recommendations provided in the Commercial Land Use Review. The Official Plan (2010) establishes an urban structure based on a hierarchy of intensification areas, that range in height and intensify of use.

New commercial development is to be integrated into each level of this intensification hierarchy.

Retail policies in the updated Official Plan place an emphasis on building pedestrian-friendly and transit supportive commercial areas with attractive urban design, and revitalization, intensification and redevelopment of existing retail. These new policies direct new retail to Intensification areas, where they will be part of an overall mixed use development.

Transit-oriented and walkable and Urban Design

- To require that new retail be designed to be walkable, transit supportive and integrated into communities and pedestrian and cycling networks with high-quality urban design (Section 5.2.3.2).
- That the primary location for new retail uses is planned to be Intensification Areas, where they will benefit from transit service and help build mixed-use communities. Retail developments within Intensification Areas will support the general objectives and policies for these through the following; [...] b. retail uses will be sited and oriented to support walking, cycling and transit use (Section 5.2.3.4).

Additionally, the 2010 OP policies reflect a desire to divert from the prevailing power centre mode of commercial development. The Policy section related to retail development, entitled “Supporting and Transforming the Retail Sector”, directs that “existing standalone shopping centres will be permitted to transform into mixed-use buildings and districts that incorporate residential, office and institutional uses” (City of Vaughan, 2010b, Section 5.2.3).

Overview

Vaughan’s commercial hierarchy was formed by a series of Official Plan Amendments prior to the 2010 Official Plan. These Amendments demonstrate that the City has been planning for higher-density, compact commercial developments beginning in the mid-

1990's. The vision for what is now the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre was laid in the Vaughan Corporate Centre Secondary Plan (1998), and eighteen years later the City is still working to intensify the development of the area through a revised Secondary Plan and Community Improvement Plan (City of Vaughan, 2015).

Commercial land use policy in Vaughan evolved from establishing a commercial structure based on planned function, towards an approach that integrates land uses in a hierarchy of intensification. Prior to the adoption of the Growth Plan (2006), the City of Vaughan was utilized the principles mixed-use, compact development in some areas, most notably the Vaughan Corporate Centre. The general commercial policies outlined in OPA 600 spoke to protection of the commercial hierarchy, this concept was abandoned in the 2010 Official Plan, which outlines a hierarchy of intensification.

Richmond Hill

Context

The Town of Richmond Hill is centrally located within York Region, and has a population of approximately 181,000 (Statistics Canada, 2012). Like most of the local municipalities in York Region, it has experienced rapid growth over the past 25 years. Growth and development peaked in the 1990's, and while this pace of growth has now declined, the town continues to grow at a stable rate. The York Region growth management forecast anticipates that the Richmond Hill will absorb approximately 70,000 new residents and approximately 40,000 new jobs between 2006 and 2031. Approximately 52% of Richmond Hill is located within the Oak Ridges Moraine, including the most urbanized part of the Moraine and its significant east-west natural linkage corridor (Town of Richmond Hill, 2010).

Richmond Hill has a designated Urban Growth Centre (UGC), Richmond Hill/Langstaff Gateway. This Urban Growth Centre contains land in both Richmond Hill and the City of Markham. As per the Places to Grow Act (2005), this UGC is planned for intensification

in the York Region Official Plan (2010), which expands upon the boundaries of the UGC to create the Richmond Hill Regional Centre (Figure 7). Richmond Hill Regional Centre, which is located north and east of the intersection of Highway 7 and Yonge Street and just north of Highway 407. It is located in proximity to proposed higher order transit along Yonge Street, Highway 7 and the Langstaff GO train line. The density target for the Richmond Hill UGC includes 200 residents and jobs combined per hectare by 2031 (Town of Richmond Hill, 2010).

Currently, the Richmond Hill Regional Centre is the site of large format retail and associated parking lots, a few high rise residential towers and some smaller scale commercial and residential development along Yonge Street (Town of Richmond Hill, 2009c).

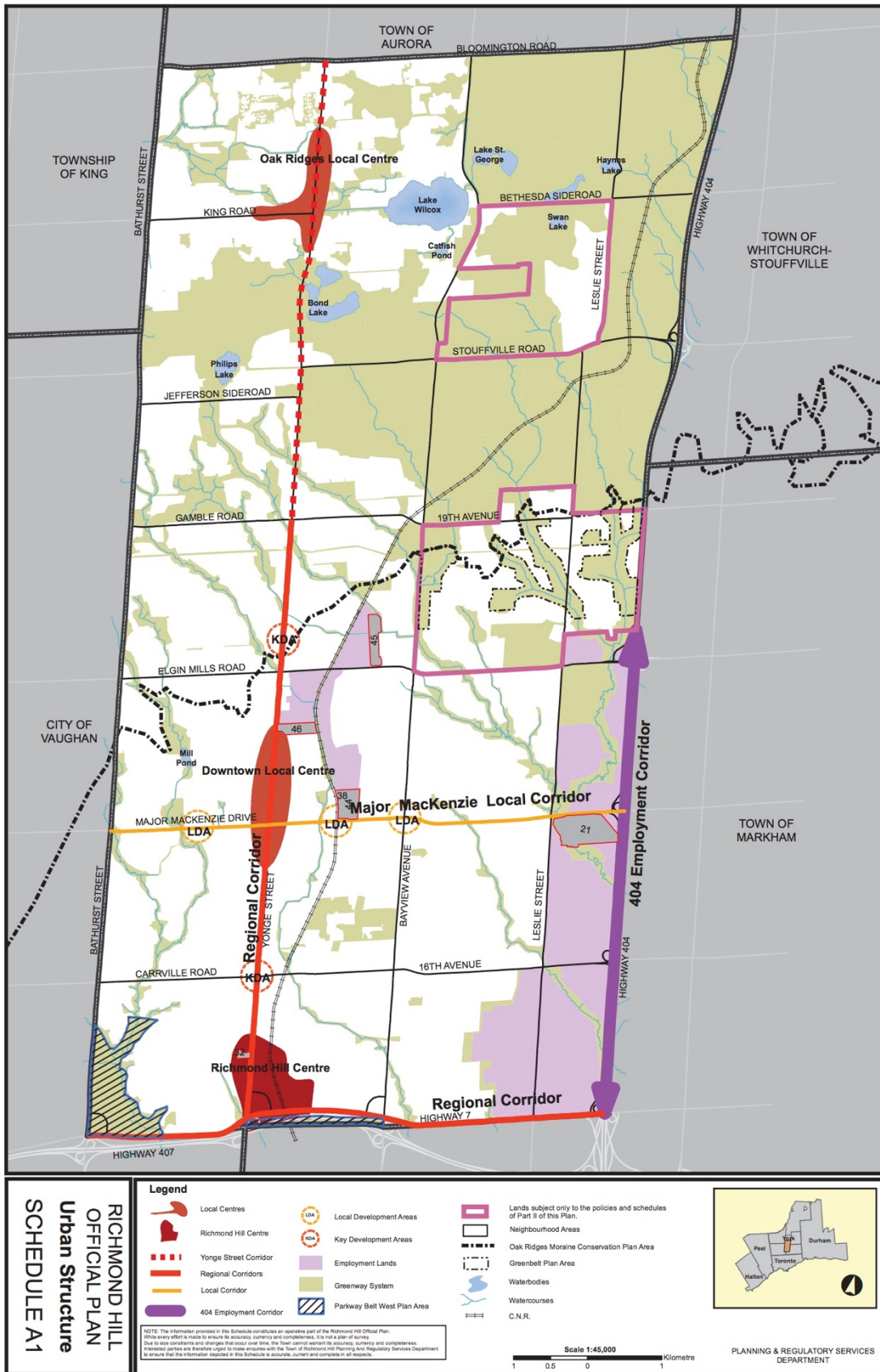


Figure 7: Richmond Hill Urban Structure (Richmond Hill, 2010a)

Commercial structure

A Commercial Needs Study conducted by Hemson Consulting in 2009 provides an overview of the commercial structure in Richmond Hill (Town of Richmond Hill, 2009b). The built structure of the town has been guided by a planned hierarchy of community types and this hierarchy has been built out. There exists a variety of commercial developments in the town, including regional shopping, power centres, and community and neighbourhood retail.

Yonge Street (Main Street) defines the retail commercial structure on a north-south axis, with nodes of activity on major intersections. Commercial nodes include:

- Hillcrest Mall at Carreville Road and 16th Ave
- Downtown node north of Major MacKenzie Drive
- Power centre at Elgin Mills Road

Commercial Policy Overview 1995-2016

Official Plan Amendment 129 (1998)

Prior to the adoption of the 2010 Official Plan, Richmond Hill's policies regarding commercial development were set out in Official Plan Amendment 129, adopted in 1998. These policies established an explicitly commercial hierarchy based on the planned function of the development, meaning whose needs are being served (neighbourhood, town, region), the size of the development and the number of anchor tenants.

Commercial Needs Study (2009)

Between 2008 and 2010, Richmond Hill completed a review of the Official Plan. As part of this review, an Economic Policy Review, including a Commercial Needs Assessment, was completed (Town of Richmond Hill, 2009a; 2009b). This review recommended that the commercial hierarchy framework be replaced by one that manages change in

commercial areas through the urban structure of centres and corridors. Additionally, policy in the new Official Plan should refrain from including new commercial designations and should divert or redirect retail commercial development to mixed-use intensification (Town of Richmond Hill, 2009b)

The report also recommended adopting moving away from the “separated land use” approach which has led to “a pattern of retail commercial uses being differentiated by function, separated by distance, yet linked by road or transit” (Town of Richmond Hill, 2009b, p.24). The report argues that this has resulted in a built form that is stand-alone one storey buildings, with auto-oriented design characteristics. Instead, retail should be treated as an “integrated land use”. This means combining a mix of uses in the same building or node. The report refers to this as an “emerging model in retail commercial planning”, and this approach can be seen in the approach of both the City of Vaughan and the City of Markham (Town of Richmond Hill, 2009b, p. 24-25).

Official Plan 2010

These recommendations of the Economic Policy Review (2009) were implemented in the Town of Richmond Hill 2010 Official Plan, which adopts an “integrated” approach to retail development. The urban structure is organized into a hierarchy of intensification areas, with commercial uses integrated into each level of the hierarchy that allows for mixed-use.

As part of this hierarchy, the Official Plan identifies Key Development Areas, which are intensification areas located in a Regional Corridor. In these intensification areas “public rapid transit corridors intersect with major nodes of retail and commercial development activity, and where opportunities exist for redevelopment of large sites that can support new public streets, parks and urban open space connections” (Town of Richmond Hill 2010, Section 4.4). This Key Development Area designation reflects a clear desire to facilitate redevelopment of the existing large-format commercial developments existing in these sites. Section 4.4.1.1 states, “it is a long term objective of this Plan that intensification of existing major retail uses occur through redevelopment into a more compact built form” (Town of Richmond Hill 2010, Section 4.4.1.1).

In terms of policy specifically related to retail development, the policy themes present in the 2010 Official Plan are; integrating retail into communities, transit-oriented and walkable development, and an emphasis on quality urban design. Policies regarding retail development are included with Employment in Centres and Corridors policy.

Integrated into communities, Transit-oriented and walkable and Urban design

- New retail including major retail shall be designed to be pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented, and integrated into communities and pedestrian and cycling networks, and be designed to achieve high quality urban design (Section 3.3.2.5).

Overview

Prior to the Growth Plan, Richmond Hill's commercial policy was outlined as a commercial hierarchy in Official Plan Amendment 129. This hierarchy classified commercial developments based on their planned function, size and number of anchor tenants. Many of the commercial developments that had been built under this approach were stand-alone, one-storey buildings. The 2010 Official Plan adopted an "integrated" approach, rather than a "separated land use" approach that establishes a hierarchy of intensification areas. Some of these areas are now designated Key Development Areas, which are existing major nodes of retail that are expected to be intensified and redeveloped as mixed-use areas.

City of Markham

Context

The City of Markham is located in the south-western edge of York Region and has a population of approximately 310,000 (Statistics Canada, 2012). The City originated from a collection of rural villages; Unionville, Markham, Milliken and Thornhill. These

villages, as well as smaller communities were incorporated in 1971 to create the Town of Markham. The Town moved to City status in 2012, after experiencing significant growth and becoming a significant employment centre within York Region and the Greater Toronto Area (City of Markham, 2014). The York Regional Official Plan (2010) growth forecast anticipates 150,000 new residents and 100,000 new jobs in Markham between 2006 and 2031. This represents one-quarter of the Region's population growth and almost one-third of its employment growth (York Region, 2010).

Markham has two Regional Centres/Urban Growth Centres: Markham Centre and Langstaff Gateway. Markham Centre is located on the Highway 7 Rapid Transit Corridor and Langstaff Gateway is part of the Richmond Hill/Langstaff Gateway Urban Growth Centre along the Yonge Street Rapid Transit Corridor (Figure 8). Markham Centre is planned and developed as Markham's downtown, with a high-density, mixed use development and an urban character. Langstaff Gateway is subject to a secondary plan and is planned to be a compact, complete, integrated and sustainable community (Town of Markham, 2009). Both of these Regional Centres are planned for a minimum density of 200 residents and jobs per hectare, as per the Urban Growth Centre policies of the Growth Plan (City of Markham, 2014).

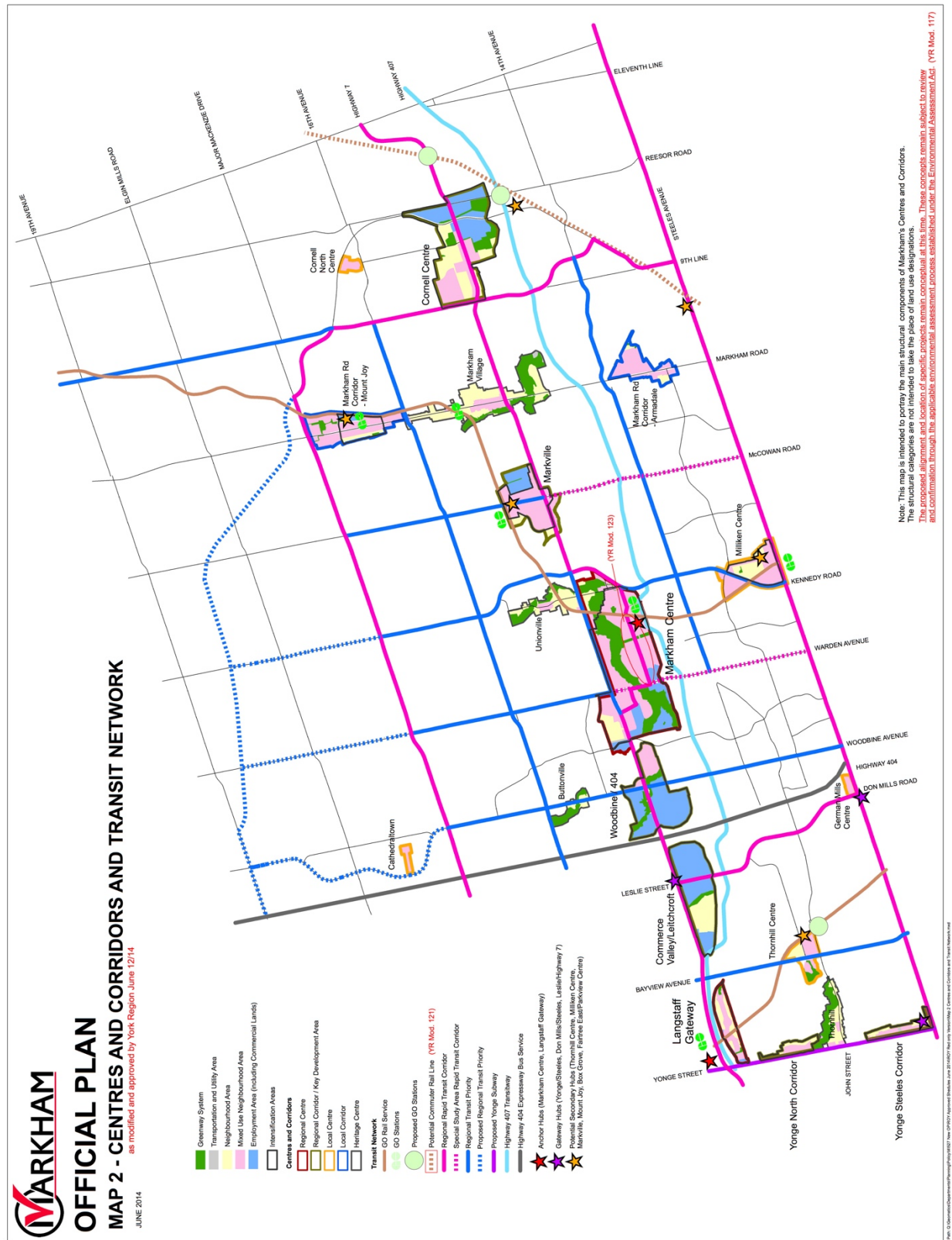


Figure 8: Markham Centres and Corridors Network (City of Markham, 2014)

Commercial structure

The York Region Retail Trends Study (2015) identified that Markham is the site of one Super-Regional retail node, three Regional/Specialty retail nodes and seven community retail nodes (Figure 4). Markville Mall, Markham's super-regional retail node, is comprised of approximately 1.4 million square feet of retail space, while the three Regional/Specialty node make up 2.3 million square feet, and the other community nodes make up a combined 1.2 million square feet. Markham is also home to three historical main streets; Markham Main Street, Markham Unionville Main Street and Thornhill Main Street (York Region, 2015).

Commercial Policy Overview 1994-2016

Official Plan Amendment 26 (1994)

In 1994, Markham commissioned a review of its commercial policies by Hemson Consulting and John Winter Associates and updated the commercial section of its Official Plan (Town of Markham, 2004a). Some of the issues that prompted this review included: the restructuring of the commercial sector which made it difficult to regulate the impact of "big box" development, Official Plan policies that were focused on market-based retail hierarchy, lack of consistency and standardization in OP policies and zoning by-laws, and a need to better defined the "planned" function of commercial and industrial land use designations. Official Plan Amendment 26 implemented the 1994 Commercial Uses Study recommended changes.

These changes included:

- Changing the policy structure to better reflect Markham's retail activities
- Providing flexibility to commercial land to commercial land use categories
- Consider market issues only if they impact the overall commercial structure or "planned function"
- Monitoring changes to the commercial structure

Official Plan Amendment 132 (2004)

Commercial land use policies were reviewed again in 2004 by John Winter Associates (Town of Markham, 2004a). Tate Economic Group provided a peer review of these recommendations (Town of Markham, 2005).

This review was prompted by a newly elected Council's strategic priorities, which included "create a better quality community" (Town of Markham, 2004b, p. 3). Under this objective, the Council had identified actions items related to commercial development:

- Strive to develop a strong sense of place in all communities in Markham, through the development of community facilities and 'walk to' commercial centres as focal points, wherever possible.
- Pursue small neighbourhood retail focus/community gathering places, in central locations, in those new communities currently needing such facilities including South Unionville, Berczy, Legacy, Wismer and Angus Glen.
- Shift planning policies to discourage auto-oriented big-box retail development and encourage pedestrian friendly retail activity and mixed land uses at community focal points (Town of Markham, 2004b, p.3).

The commercial land use review addressed several challenges that the Town had been facing related to commercial development. One of these challenges included a lack of neighbourhood level retail, in Community Amenity Areas (CAAs), a commercial designation in the Official Plan. CAAs were meant to provide a basis for mixed use development in neighbourhoods, by allowing small-scale retail and office uses in residential neighbourhoods. However, most of these sites developed as only residential or only retail (Town of Markham, 2005). The Tate Economic Group report attributed this to number of factors: the preference for residential development over commercial development due to the higher value of residential development and the proficient supply of retail along regional roads that are in proximity to new residential development. The solution recommended was to mandate neighbourhood and community scale commercial uses into the design of future neighbourhoods and reserve

these lands for commercial uses until there is a population level able to support commercial development (Town of Markham, 2005).

Another major issue discussed was the prevalence of “big box” development and how to incorporate this development into the city. Big box development was seen as inevitable, and it was recommended that it be accommodated at suitable locations and in appropriate forms consistent with the Town’s development objectives. Since big box stores compete with other employment uses for prime locations, it was argued that land be made available for these developments so that they are not competing with more intensive development (Town of Markham, 2005).

Employment Needs Study (2009)

In 2009, a report on Employment Land Needs completed by urbanMetrics and Meridian looked into commercial land needs of the Town. While the John Winters Associates 2004 report suggested that additional commercial lands would be needed to support growth beyond 2021, this analysis was seen as outdated in the 2009 Employment Needs report. In the time since the Winters report, there had been a policy shift and the Growth Plan (2006) required that municipalities direct economic activities (including retail) to areas of intensification. On-going issues discussed in the report included a lack of retail development in Community Commercial Areas (CAAs) and big box development (Town of Markham, 2009).

Encouraging small-scale commercial uses in Community Amenity Areas (CAAs) continued to be an issue for the Town, as the majority of these CAAs were being developed with only residential development. The report recognized that a policy framework supportive of mixed use is not enough to achieve mixed use in these neighbourhoods, if there is no market to support commercial or retail uses. Many of the neighbourhoods where CAAs designations existed were in proximity to large, well-established retail strips, and therefore there was little demand for additional retail in those neighbourhoods.

In order to encourage the development of more mixed-use commercial areas, it was recommended that the Town actively discourage the development of commercial areas that are devoted exclusively to large format retail uses (Town of Markham, 2009). While the market for big box developments was expected to continue to grow, large-scale retail should only be allowed only in the context of mixed used development.

Additional recommendations include:

- To cease the conversion of industrial land for retail uses, given the shortfall of industrial land (the 2014 Provincial Policy Statement only allows the conversion of employment land after a Municipal Comprehensive Review).
- To only consider major retail facilities once it has been determined that all commercially designated sites are exhausted, and that local-area market demand patterns indicate a need for new retail space.
- To refrain from expanding the commercial land supply outside the current settlement area, as this would jeopardize the viability of existing key growth nodes, such as the corridors along Highway 7 and Yonge Street (Town of Markham, 2009)

Official Plan 2014 (under appeal)

The 2014 Official Plan sets out an urban structure that is based on varying levels of intensification areas, with commercial uses integrated within other uses (City of Markham, 2014).

Markham's priority intensification areas include lands within Regional Centres and Key Development Areas (KDA) on Regional Corridors. Key Development Areas are located where rapid transit services intersect with major nodes of retail and commercial development and where "opportunities exist for redevelopment of large land parcels that support new public streets and mixed-use development" (City of Markham, 2014, Section 2.5.2). These Key Development Areas are identified along Yonge Street and Highway 7 Rapid Transit Corridors (Figure 8).

The predominant policy themes related to retail focus on integrating retail into new mixed-use developments and redeveloping and intensifying existing major retail.

Integration of retail into the community

- To provide for the integration of new retail and service uses within mixed-use developments on lands designated “Mixed Use” (Section 5.1.7.2)

Intensification and redevelopment

- To encourage the intensification of existing single-use, single-storey retail and service sites within the ‘Mixed Use’ designations with multi-use, multi-storey development, while ensuring a similar retail and service function is retained (Section 5.1.7.3).

The commercial policies in the 2014 Official Plan reflect a clear desire to move away from power retail development and towards mixed-use and compact development. Section 5.1.7. of it’s Official Plan states, “in the future, the emphasis will be to move away from large-format retail development (single-use retail complexes surrounded by large surface parking lots) towards more compact, mixed-use developments” (City of Markham, 2014, Section 5.1.7).

Overview

The City of Markham has been on the cutting edge of suburban intensification and mixed-use community planning and has therefore dedicated considerable attention to commercial land use policy. A review of the commercial policy over the past two decades reveal that there are several recurring commercial planning issues that the City has been dealing with, namely how to deal with the undesirable big box retail format and how to provide community level retail in new communities.

A review of the various commercial land use reviews that the City has commissioned over the years illuminates the evolution in thinking about how to plan for commercial development. From Official Plan Amendment 26 to the policies contained City of

Markham 2014 Official Plan, there has been a move from a commercial hierarchy based on market need, to a commercial hierarchy based on “planned function” and finally an “integrated” approach that has no explicit hierarchy.

Discussion

Case Study Analysis

In order to analyze the evolution of commercial land use planning, policy documents relating to commercial land use policy were reviewed in Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham. Beyond simply reviewing and summarizing these policies, content analysis was conducted in order to identify themes and patterns in these policies. This analysis revealed six different themes present in these documents. These themes were identified after several reviews of the documents, and were informed by background research on commercial retail planning in Ontario, as well as the policy discussions in the commercial land use studies which informed these policies. The definitions for these themes are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Definitions of Policy Themes

Theme	Definition
Protection of the commercial hierarchy	An emphasis on establishing a commercial hierarchy, or protecting the existing commercial hierarchy when considering all future development.
Urban design	Ensuring that commercial areas are established in accordance with the sound principles of urban design. This includes consideration of siting and orientation of buildings, sunlight, height and massing and the location of parking areas.
Integration of retail into the community	Commercial retail planning will integrate with other permitted land uses in a mixed-use format.
Intensification and redevelopment	Encouraging the intensification and redevelopment of existing low-density large-format commercial developments.
Pedestrian-friendly and transit-oriented	To require that new retail be designed to be walkable, transit, supportive, and integrated into communities and pedestrian and cycling networks.

Protection and preservation of historic main streets	Protecting and preserving the economic vitality or heritage attributes and characteristics of historic main streets.
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A summary of the themes present in each municipal Official Plan, before and after the Growth Plan, is provided in Table 2. This summary reveals some patterns:

- Two municipalities (Vaughan and Richmond Hill) have policies that emphasize protection of the commercial hierarchy pre-Growth Plan, but do not have these policies in their most recent Official Plans.
- The theme of intensification and redevelopment is only addressed in post-Growth Plan Official Plans.
- All municipalities address a wider range of policy themes in their post-Growth Plan policies than were present in their previous Official Plans.

These patterns suggest a shifting approach to retail development, in order to meet the objectives of the Growth Plan (2006).

Table 2: Changing themes in Pre-Growth and Post-Growth Official Plans

Table 2: Changing themes Pre-Growth and Post-Growth Plan		
Municipality	Themes present in Pre-Growth Plan Official Plan	Themes present in Post-Growth Plan Official Plan
York Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban design • Protect and preserve historic main streets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration into the community • Urban design • Intensification and redevelopment • Transit-oriented and walkable • Protect and preserve historic main streets
City of Vaughan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection of the commercial hierarchy • Urban design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit-oriented and walkable • Urban design • Intensification and redevelopment

Town of Richmond Hill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Protection of the commercial hierarchy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Integrated into communities ● Transit-oriented and walkable ● Urban design ● Intensification and redevelopment
City of Markham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Transit and pedestrian-supportive environment ● Preserve and enhance historic main street ● Urban design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Preserve and enhance existing main streets ● Integration of retail into the community ● Intensification and redevelopment of existing retail

Evolution of Commercial Land-Use Planning

This paper aimed to describe how urbanizing municipalities in York Region are legislating retail development in an effort to meet the objectives of the Growth Plan (2006). To answer this question, case studies were conducted on three municipalities through the review and analysis of policy documents relating to commercial land use. These case studies have revealed that municipalities have adopted an integrated approach to land use planning that creates a hierarchy of density within the municipality, and commercial uses are treated as one component of these mixed-use areas.

The summary of themes in Table 2, as well as the policy discussions present in the case studies, reveal an evolution in thinking about how to plan retail for communities. Along with policies regarding housing and employment, commercial land use policies have changed over time in reflection of changing ideas about the role of land use planning in communities, the definition of what a healthy community looks like and the best practices in how to implement this vision.

The period between 1995 and 2015 in Ontario covers one of these shifts, the shift between establishing a commercial hierarchy based on the planned function of a commercial area, to land use policies that emphasize a hierarchy of densities. This coincides with a shift in the planning field from planning for separated land use planning (single-use) to planning for mixed-uses, as well as the disruption of the commercial

hierarchy ideal by new forms retail, namely power retail. This shift is illustrated by the themes that are present in respective policy documents, specifically the disappearance of the commercial hierarchy in post-Growth Plan (2006) Official Plans, and the emphasis on intensification and redevelopment (see Table 2).

The commercial land use studies are particularly useful for insight into the planning rationales which informed commercial land use policy decisions. By comparing the policies of the three municipal case studies at different points in time, these shifts in planning rationale become apparent. This begins with the review of Markham's commercial land use policy review completed in 1994, in which recommended that Markham move away from policies that were focused on a "market-based" retail hierarchy and instead define the "planned function" commercial and industrial land use designations (Town of Markham. 2004a).

This "planned function" approach to commercial land use planning can be found in the pre-Growth Plan Official Plans in Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham. In these Official Plans, a hierarchy is established based on the servicing needs of residents. For example, the Vaughan's OPA 600 categorizes different designations based on the "weekly needs" (Neighbourhood Commercial Centres) or "daily convenience needs" (Local Convenience Centres) of the surrounding neighbourhood (City of Vaughan, 2001). In Richmond Hill, Official Plan Amendment 129 established a hierarchy of commercial uses based on the area that the commercial development is meant to service. For example, Neighbourhood Commercial Areas are primarily intended to serve the needs of one or more planning districts, while Regional Commercial areas serve the needs of the entire Town and a portion of York Region (Town of Richmond Hill, 1998). Similarly, the City of Markham defined the planned function of a commercial designation based on who the use was serving (the local neighbourhood, the municipality or the broader region) (Town of Markham, 1995).

The "integrated" land use approach is adopted by Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham in their most recent Official Plans. This approach is described in the Commercial Needs study conducted by Hemson Consulting for the Town of Richmond

Hill in 2009. The “integrated approach” essentially means combining a mix of uses in the same building or node, rather than the establishing a hierarchy based on “single uses” like the “planned function” approach. The report refers to this as an “emerging model in retail commercial planning” (Town of Richmond Hill, 2009b, p. 25).

The “integrated” approach is evident in all three case studies most recent Official Plans. The urban structure established in these plans is based on a hierarchy of mixed-use intensification areas, and commercial uses are one of the permitted uses in these areas.

Power Retail

Existing research on power retail has argued that it has been a disruptive force to the existing commercial hierarchy. Planners had been establishing commercial hierarchies based on their planned function, with commercial development designated to serve a specific market. Planners’ objective is to maintain controlled commercial competition within a commercial hierarchy has been undermined by retail locations in distant locations, including other jurisdictions (Hernandez and Simmons, 2006).

These case studies have provided some insight into how power retail has influenced commercial land use planning in the Greater Toronto Area. One of the key findings of is that power retail, or “big box” retail has been an issue that municipalities have been concerned with for at least the past twenty years (1995-2015). All of the commercial land use policy reviews conducted over this twenty-year time period discussed how to manage power retail development. Two of the three municipalities (Vaughan and Markham) have been planning for mixed-use commercial development, in some capacity, since the 1990s.

Therefore, the Official Plans updated to comply with the Growth Plan represent a renewed effort to facilitate mixed-use, compact commercial developments. In all three case studies, post-Growth Plan policies regarding commercial development indicate a clear desire to facilitate the intensification and redevelopment of existing power retail. In

order to facilitate this intensification and redevelopment, these areas have been designated as Intensification areas or Key Development Areas.

The City of Vaughan directs new retail to intensification areas and encourages the intensification of existing developments. The Official Plan section related to retail development, entitled “Supporting and Transforming the Retail Sector”, directs that “existing standalone shopping centres will be permitted to transform into mixed-use buildings and districts that incorporate residential, office and institutional uses” (City of Vaughan, 2010, Section 5.2.3).

The Town of Richmond Hill and the City of Markham both designate much of their existing power retail as Key Development areas, which are defined as location where rapid transit services intersect with major nodes of retail and commercial development and where there are opportunities for the redevelopment of large land parcels (Town of Richmond Hill, 2010, Section 4.4; City of Markham, 2014, Section 5.1.7). It is clear that municipalities expect that much of the power retail located along rapid transit corridors, and within Regional Centres will eventually redevelopment due to rising land values in these areas due investment in transit and greater permissions for density.

Recommendations

In order to assist municipalities in achieving the objectives of the Growth Plan (2006), the following actions are recommended to the provincial government:

- 1) Consult with municipalities and developers to gain insight into the challenges of planning for compact, mixed-use commercial development.

Municipalities plan for commercial development with little direction from the provincial government and there exists a variety of approaches that municipalities could take towards commercial development. Therefore, the province should consult with municipalities in order to gain insight into the challenges faced in planning for more compact, mixed-use commercial development. For example, the commercial land use

studies conducted in Markham illustrated that the City of Markham has been planning for small-scale, mixed use commercial development in its residential neighbourhoods for the past twenty years. However, very little of this type of development has occurred due to market conditions that favor residential development.

- 2) Expand policy tools outside of land use policy in order to encourage compact, mixed-use commercial development.

The case studies demonstrated that these municipalities have developed a strong policy framework that encourages compact, mixed use development. However, as suggested in the York Region Retail Needs Study, a strong policy framework alone is not sufficient for achieving this urban form. There are number of market conditions that discourage mixed-use, compact development in York Region, including an auto-oriented transportation network and the continued availability of greenfield sites for development (York Region, 2015). While the province and municipalities are addressing these underlying conditions through investments in transit infrastructure and land use policies that restrict greenfield development, it will likely take decades for these policies to shift market conditions in York Region.

In the interim, the province should consider exploring policy tools outside of land use policy, such as financial incentives, that could support these objectives. This could include expanding upon existing tools provided to municipalities, such as Community Improvement Plans, deferral of development charges, bonusing and development permit systems. These financial incentives could jump-start key projects in high-profile centres and corridors, demonstrating to the development industry that denser mixed-use developments are viable and achievable in urban areas like York Region.

- 3) Provide further direction for planning commercial development.

The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006) directs municipalities to plan for *complete communities* which have “a diverse mix of land uses, a range and mix of employment and housing types, high quality public open space and easy access to local

stores and services” (Province of Ontario, 2006, 13). After analyzing how commercial land use policies have evolved over the past twenty years, it is clear that there is less emphasis on commercial areas as a service, and more attention placed on their built character and density. In contrast, much more attention is paid to the service role of housing and employment development at the provincial and municipal level.

This approach to planning for commercial development ignores the important role commercial services play in Ontario municipalities, in terms of place-making, transportation planning and economic development. Additionally, planning for commercial uses will likely become even more important to local and regional economies as service-related employment continue to grow. The recommendations provided by the Advisory Panel for the Coordinated Review of the provincial land use plans recognize that this shift will impact planning to economic development (Province of Ontario, 2015).

In order to achieve the objective of complete communities, the province should provide direction on commercial land use planning that considers the service role of commercial development. This coordination could take on a variety of forms. Most importantly, the province should explain what “easy access” to stores and services looks like in high, medium and low-density urban areas. This could take the form of a service-level standard or guidelines on how to integrate commercial uses to meet the commercial needs of communities, along with transportation, employment and housing needs.

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