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The Transformation of a Landscape: How the Seaton Process Worked

To look at the planning of Seaton is to investigate the changing aspirations of planning, design and public policy in the Toronto region over the last 25 years. The story of the Seaton lands reflects the variation in political will and ideological attitudes towards issues like community development, environmental consciousness, economics and public involvement.

The urbanization of Seaton was first contemplated in the early 1970s. The Ontario provincial government, concerned about the increased urbanization taking place west of Toronto, began an initiative to redirect growth eastward and rationalize it with the development of infrastructure and several new-town-style communities. A new trunk sewer was built east to the Durham region.

Keeping with this strategy, the provincial and federal governments announced plans to build an international airport and two of the new communities (with a total population of up to 100,000) in the area served by the new sewer, some 20 miles northeast of Toronto. They expropriated about 38,000 acres for the project.

Public outcry forced cancellation of the airport in 1975, but there was support for some development. The recommended plan called for a mixed-use community of up to 85,000, the creation of a large agricultural zone and protection of historic hamlets.

In 1982 the Durham regional government designated urban land uses for the areas where the new communities would be and in 1986 the town of Pickering began a more detailed planning study. But the abandonment of the airport changed many of the assumptions about the area, and there was a growing perception that the plan should be more environmentally sound and that there should be a more open public process. The Pickering Planning Committee deferred its draft plan in 1988, closing the first phase of Seaton's history.

In the late 1980s the urbanization of the

Toronto region continued at a fast pace. In 1989, the provincial government, concerned about rising housing costs, reactivated the quasi-public corporation that had been in charge of developing the Seaton lands and set up the Seaton Interim Planning Team, which would be responsible for updating plans for the land.

There was also a shift in strategy: Seaton was now seen as an opportunity to explore emerging approaches in environmentally sound and sustainable development within the context of planning, designing and developing a new community.

The team began by conferring with public interest groups, stakeholders, regional and local planning agencies, other ministries, academic institutions and private consultants. The process culminated with a community workshop, sponsored by the province.

What generally emerged from these discussions was a concern about typical suburbanization of the rural urban fringe — sprawling development, dependence on automobiles, lack of pedestrian orientation, segregated land use patterns, the loss of natural areas — and a desire to conserve water and energy and reduce waste.

The workshop resulted in a report, *Seaton: A Strategy for Environmentally Responsible Planning*, that was sent directly to the housing minister in 1990. The report urged that the development of Seaton be guided by principles of stewardship — preserving the environmental quality of the land, maximizing the quality of life for residents and creating sustainable economic opportunities.

The report differentiated between two basic issues. It argued that preserving the existing environment and rural community should be the first priority. (The province soon put the lands to the west side of its holdings into a long-term agricultural preserve, leaving only the 7,000 acres under urban designation available for future development.)

The report also proposed a new town of up to 90,000 residents on up to 3,500 acres (not including natural features). The development, the report said, should follow five principles:

1. Seaton should demonstrate how compact development can better meet current needs.
2. Seaton's population should reflect the diversity of cultures, ages and incomes found in the region. It should include many scales of business and industry and promote a variety of land ownership including cooperatives, corporations and institutions.
3. Seaton's neighborhoods should include a mix of building types that encourage living, working and gathering places. Social services should be designed to meet the diverse needs of the community and be accessible to everyone.
4. Seaton should be an adaptable community, with a built-in capacity to evolve over time. Its physical, social and economic structures should be flexible, so the community has built-in resilience.
5. Seaton's plan should work within the limitations imposed by available natural resources, the larger economy and market realities.

The report also proposed a design competition that would test these planning ideas, guide the development of design criteria and guide decisions about what lands should be developed.

Changes in the provincial government stalled the project until 1993. That October, the province established a public advisory committee to oversee the competition. Together, the committee and the Interim Planning Team retained technical advisors and created a jury of outside experts and committee members to evaluate the design proposals.

In December, 1993, multidisciplinary consulting teams were invited to submit concept plans

and written statements. The initial direction they were given was based essentially on *Seaton: A Strategy for Environmentally Responsible Planning*. In April, 1994, three finalist groups were asked to develop their concepts more thoroughly. The competition was completed in November, 1994.

That fall, the provincial government shifted once again, this time to the Conservative Party, which was elected essentially by a suburban-rural electorate based on a mandate to reduce the provincial deficit. Its term has been focused on cutting costs by reducing the role of government, reorganizing social programs and promoting privatization.

Enlightened aspects of the planning act (environmental and social considerations and public consultation) have been repealed or ignored. The Seaton agricultural preserve is now being dismantled and market studies are being conducted to evaluate its sale. Yet, amidst all this posturing, Seaton remains intact.

The true lesson of Seaton is that when higher level government leadership fails, dedication by principled public servants and an open, community-based planning approach can carry an important vision into the future. As Blake once said, "A person's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

For more information about the Seaton project, contact the Seaton Interim Planning Team, 25 Grosvenor St., 13th floor, Toronto, Ontario, M7A 1R1, (416) 314-0770.

The first place entry to the Seaton competition was submitted by a team called Ontario Form Collaborative, whose members included: George Baird, Mac Cosburn, Adrian DiCastrì, Anne Fort-Manares, Peter Goring, Pat Hanson, Ed Levy, Doug McGill, Val Rynlimen, Barry Sampson, John Sewell, Warren Sorenson, Alex Topps, John van Nostrand, Jim Ward, Gary Watchorn, Peter Waller, Tom Zlays.

The second place entry was submitted by a team led by Klaus Dunker (see page 35 for a list of team members). The third place entry was submitted by a team called The C.E.D. Group (Community, Ecology, Economy, Design), led by Dunlop Farrow, Inc.