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Chong's Arguments Against Urban Sprawl

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Wellington-Halton Hills: This is the first part in a series of articles that will examine one of the biggest challenges we face as a society, in Wellington-Halton Hills and throughout Canada.

Over the past number of years, concern over the environment has been top of mind for Canadians. Yet the focus is often on the symptoms, rather than the root causes, of environment degradation. One of the biggest root causes of environmental destruction in Canada is urban sprawl.

Urban sprawl is destroying thousands of acres of habitat for flora and fauna. Wellington and Halton alone are home to over a dozen species at risk of complete extinction, including the Great Egret, the Jefferson Salamander and the Green Snake. All are at risk of extinction due to habitat loss, most of it caused by urban sprawl. Most of this sprawl is taking place in the Carolinian forest zone, an area with the highest bio-density in Canada and in this country found only in Southern Ontario.

While farmland is not native wilderness, along its windrows and forest cover it nevertheless provides much habitat for a wide variety of species. Furthermore, farmland is one generation away from wilderness. Left fallow, it reverts back to its natural state in thirty or forty years, but land paved under will never go back to its natural state.

In addition, there are signs that the Great Lakes - containing almost 20% of the world's freshwater - are under threat from urban sprawl. The water levels in all five Great Lakes are below long-term averages and some are at record lows. Lake Ontario alone is nearly seven inches below levels of a year ago. All this growth is draining our aquifers and destroying our watersheds. Indeed, the biggest threat to the Great Lakes may come not from pressures to divert water to the dry American Southwest, but rather from explosive urban growth in Ontario.

Perhaps the strongest environmental argument against sprawl is the global threat presented by rising greenhouse gas emissions. In destroying this farmland, in creating this sprawl, we are constructing a high-carbon infrastructure system of highways and sprawling communities that will not only prevent us from reducing our greenhouse gasses, but will in fact ensure we only increase them.

Urban sprawl also represents a serious threat to our food supply. We are destroying much of the prime farmland needed to grow our own food. While much of the food eaten today is imported and while much of farming is unprofitable, we cannot let the short-term economic problems in agriculture cloud our judgement about the long-term. Nothing is more vital to our long-term national interest than the ability to produce our own basic food supply. Good farmland, good soil, good climate and consistent rainfall are needed to do that, precisely what we have in southern Ontario.

We cannot assume the long-term security of our imported food supply. Only 60 years ago Western Europe - one of the world's great breadbaskets - faced starvation. A disruption to imported foodstuffs would be devastating; Cuba has survived five decades without American automobiles, but would not survive a month without food.

If the environmental and food supply arguments remain unconvincing, then certainly the harsh economic reality must be faced. Over the last fifty years we have built an infrastructure system of highways and sprawling communities that we cannot afford to maintain. There have been major bridge collapses in Montreal and Minneapolis. Closer to home, dozens of bridges and roads are in need of replacement. Even with record government revenues from one of the greatest periods of economic growth, there is simply not enough money to maintain all of this infrastructure. As a result, property taxes continue to march upward. And the reasons why property taxes are rising more rapidly in places like Mississauga than Toronto or Wellington-Halton are simple. Statistics Canada's latest 2006 census results show that the city of Toronto has a population density of almost 4,000 persons per square km, while the corresponding number for Mississauga is 2,300. In other words, the ability of a city like Mississauga, built on low density sprawl, to raise property taxes from its population base is only half of that of Toronto. Furthermore, municipalities are subsidizing development. The province has prevented them from charging developers the full cost of development. One study of an Ontario town found that for every dollar in development charges collected, a \$1.40 in services were put in. Guess where the other 40 cents are coming from? From existing ratepayers, who are, in effect, subsidizing development. More growth means paying more in property taxes. In addition, our infrastructure system of highways and sprawling communities were built during that half-century period when oil was cheap. Oil has just broken through the \$100 a barrel barrier. What happens to sprawling suburbia and the commuter lifestyle when oil reaches \$200 a barrel and gas reaches \$3 a litre? Clearly, urban sprawl is not economically sustainable.

In some ways, the most important argument against urban sprawl is that we are destroying what is most beautiful and what we cannot ever re-create: the land. The land has influenced our culture and imbued our sense of identity. How can one read and understand Archibald Lampman, Margaret Atwood, Ross Sinclair, Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje, or any of the other greats of Canadian literature if one has no connection to the land? If one has never seen the undulating hills of Wellington County, or the vastness of the Peel-Halton plain, once the breadbasket of Ontario, how can one understand what it means to be Canadian? The land in which we live is intrinsically tied to who we are as Canadians. The way we treat it is a reflection of who we are as a people.

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