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The Transformation of a Landscape: How the Seaton Process Worked [Infrastructure as Landscape, Landscape as Infrastructure]

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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 20 years. The story of the Seaton Area reflects the rationalisation of policies, and the 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 increasing urbanization taking place west of Toronto, began an initiative to redirect growth eastward and orientate it with the development of infrastructure and several new-town-style communities. A new town, Ajax, was built east in 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 300,000) in the area served by the new airport, some 30 miles southeast of Toronto. They were expected to house about 35,000 acres for the project.

Public outcry forced cancellation of the airport in 1977, but there was support for some development. The recommended plan called for a mixed-use community of up to 160,000, the creation of a large agricultural zone and protection of historic remains.

In 1980 the Durham regional government designated urban land use for the area where the new community would be and in 1982 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 1988, the provincial government, concerned about rising housing costs, constructed the quasi-public corporation that had been in charge of developing the Seaton site and kept up the Seaton Township Planning Trust, which would be responsible for updating plans for the land.

There was a shift in strategy. Seaton was now seen as an opportunity to explore entering opportunities in environmentally sound and sustainable developments within the context of planning, designing and developing a new community.

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

What generally emerged from these discussions was a concern about typical urbanization of the new urban design — 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 consisted of a report, 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, maintaining 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 set out the lands to the west side of its holdings as a long-term agricultural reserve, leaving only the 3,500 acres under urban designation available for future development.)
The report also proposed a new role of up to 90,000 residents on up to 3,000 acres (not including natural features). The development, the report said, should follow five principles:

1. Sector should demonstrate how compact development can better meet on-site needs.
2. Sector should reflect the diversity of cultures, ages, and incomes found in the region. It should include many modes of business and industry and promote a variety of land ownership including cooperatives, corporations, and institutions.
3. Sector's neighborhoods should include a mix of building types that encourage living, working, and recreational spaces. Sector's streets should be designed to meet the diverse needs of the community and be accessible to everyone.
4. Sector should be an up-scale community with a built-up capacity to evolve over time.
5. Sector's plan should work within the limitations imposed by existing natural resources, the larger economy and market realities.

The report also proposed a design competition that would use the planning ideas to guide the development of design criteria and fund decisions about what lands should be developed. Changes in the provincial government shifted the project until 1998. In this year, the province established a public advisory committee to oversee the competition. Together, the committee and the Sector Planning Team retained technical advisors and received a jury of outside experts and community members to evaluate the design proposals.

In December 1999, multidisciplinary reviewing teams were invited to submit concepts plans and renderings. The main criterion they were given was based essentially on Sector's strategy for environmentally sustainable planning. In April 1999, three final groups were asked to develop their concept plans thoroughly. The competition was reopened in November 1999.

With all the provincial government's shifts since 1991, the project to the Environment Plan, which was phased essentially by a subsequent "real estate" based on an attempt to reframe the provincial policies. In summary has been focused on cutting costs by reducing the role of governments, reorganizing social programs and transferring privatisation.

For instance, aspects of the planning are environmental and public consultation and public participation have been expanded or ignored. This sector's economic challenges is now being dismantled with market studies being conducted without sale. Yet, amidst all this planning, Sector remains intact.

The real lesson of Sector is that, when a high-level government leadership fails, dedication by principle public servants and an open, community-based planning approach can put an important vision into the future. At Stake once said, "A person's reach must exceed his grasp, or what a strange word is hope."