

‘I don’t care what the minister says’: Mayor responds to provincial official’s take on Hamilton’s boundary debate

Minister Steve Clark says no-expansion scenario is ‘irresponsible’

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Political interference. Undemocratic. Meddling in local affairs.

That’s what Hamilton politicians call Ontario Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark’s opinion piece about the city’s urban boundary debate.

In an op-ed published in The Spectator, Clark describes the inclusion of a frozen urban boundary scenario in a recent citywide survey that’s part of a long-term growth-planning exercise “so disappointing.”

The minister, who’s in charge of the provincial growth plan, also calls the option to hold firm the urban boundary “unrealistic” and “irresponsible.”

Not expanding Hamilton’s boundary would lead to a “shortfall of nearly 60,000 homes” due to a lack of land where they can be built in the existing urban footprint, Clark wrote.

“If city council continues to bury their heads in the sand and restrict where the right mix of homes can be built, I am deeply concerned this will further drive housing prices up ... putting affordable home ownership even more out of reach of hardworking families.”

In response, Fred Eisenberger told The Spectator it would be “irresponsible” not to look at a frozen boundary as the city plans to accommodate growth projected over 30 years.

The focus should be the “best long-term interest” of the city, he said.

“I don’t care what the minister says. He’s entitled to his opinion, but a no-expansion option is not a no-development option,” Eisenberger said, who added housing affordability doesn’t simply boil down to supply.

The Ontario government has told municipalities to update their official plans by July 2022 to reflect the provincial growth target which, in Hamilton’s case, predicts the city’s population will hit 820,000 by 2051 with the addition of 236,000 people.

City planners have recommended an urban boundary expansion of 1,340 hectares (roughly 3,300 acres) into rural Elfrida and Glanbrook to meet the provincial growth target and satisfy policy.

That recommendation, informed by a consultant’s analysis, is based on the province’s market-based approach to land-need assessment, which examines expected demand for different types of housing densities, from apartments to single-family homes.

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Local organizers, led by Stop Sprawl HamOnt, have replied with a campaign urging councillors to reject an urban expansion they argue plays into the interests of developers at the expense of agricultural land, rising carbon emissions and escalating infrastructure costs.

A city survey that asked residents this past summer to indicate their preference for the ambitious density, no-expansion options or another scenario garnered 18,387 responses. Of those 16,636 — or 90.4 per cent — voiced support for a frozen boundary.

But this week, a Nanos Research survey commissioned by the West End Home Builders’ Association, Ontario Real Estate Association and the Realtors Association of Hamilton-Burlington found 32 per cent wanted the

urban area to remain the same while another 22 per cent preferred to halt growth.

One of hundreds of Stop the Sprawl signs in Hamilton. JOHN RENNISON/THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

On the other hand, 38 per cent of the 700 respondents randomly selected for the phone survey favoured a boundary expansion while eight per cent weren't sure.

Mike Collins-Williams, CEO of the homebuilders' association, has argued the no-expansion option not only clashes with provincial policy, but will push would-be buyers of single-family homes to look elsewhere.

New housing supply "of all types" hasn't kept up with Hamilton's population, which has led to "significant price increases," Collins-Williams said this week.

"In order to tackle the housing crisis, we need to ensure that we have balanced solutions to deliver new supply, both through intensification and a small expansion to the urban footprint of the City of Hamilton."

Clark says the expanded planning horizon to 2051 and new land-needs methodology is about sound planning, but Ontario Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner argues the changes, in concert with bloated growth projections, are meant to pave over farmland with residential development.

"To me that's just a land grab that primarily benefits land speculators at the expense of everyone else," Schreiner said, noting sprawl-induced transportation emissions are the largest contributor of climate pollution in Ontario.

He also questioned why the Progressive Conservative government is "bringing the hammer to the Hammer and essentially trying to tell people in Hamilton how to grow and develop their city."

Local MPP Sandy Shaw contended Premier Doug Ford has enlisted Clark to do his "dirty work," calling it "unconscionable" for them to "try to short-circuit the democratic process" through "intimidation."

“Hamilton is getting this extra special unwanted attention from the premier because of what a remarkable job grassroots folks are doing in identifying the problem and pushing back,” said Shaw, who is the NDP’s environment critic.

Coun. Brad Clark, who proposed the citywide survey in March, said the provincial minister’s remarks are “premature” with the local process still unfolding. “And he should stop meddling in Hamilton politics.”

Likewise, Coun. Nrinder Nann called the minister’s take on the boundary issue “clear interference” and a snub to “every single resident” who filled out the city survey.

“To have that curtailed in the process by having the minister intervene at this point is totally undemocratic.”

Council is scheduled to consider additional reports on the already-hefty file — including a peer review of the consultant’s work and a growth cost assessment — on Nov. 9.

Eisenberger said he won’t “be swayed by polls” and remains focused on what’s “good for Hamilton” based on the material staff are expected to present. “We’re going to have a pretty fulsome perspective.”