

Engagement Insights Report

Insights and recommendations for consideration in the preparation of a new Region of Niagara Official Plan.



REGION OF NIAGARA
OCTOBER 26, 2020

**Overlap
Associates** 



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**“Despite our differences,
this Council works really
well together, has respect for
each other, and really cares
about our region.”**

— ENGAGEMENT PARTICIPANT

Introduction

Overlap Associates has been working with the Region of Niagara to gain a thorough understanding of the insights of its elected Regional Councillors regarding a new Region of Niagara Official Plan. An Official Plan is a legal document which guides matters such as growth, preservation, and infrastructure investment from a largely land use-based perspective over relatively long periods of time. Region of Niagara staff are currently proposing to recommend a new Regional Plan with a 30-year planning period from 2021 to 2051. Official Plans are adopted under the provincial Planning Act and must be reviewed by the affected municipality every five years. All Regional Councillors were presented with the opportunity for individual discussions facilitated by Overlap Associates.

Why do this work now?

During this time in a global Pandemic and the continued uncertainty it presents, advanced planning for the future of the Region of Niagara remains important. Accordingly, the following eight points summarize the key reasons for proceeding with this work now:

1. To recognize the many interactions and information needs of constituents and their elected officials in matters that involve the proposed Region of Niagara Official Plan, both in terms of content and process;
2. To provide a more current check-in opportunity with Regional Councillors;
3. To supplement the initial process to recognize business interruption that has resulted from the global Pandemic;
4. To further facilitate conversation between the time of completion of many background reports (posted on the Region's web site) and the drafting of a new Region of Niagara Official Plan;

5. To allow Regional Councillors the opportunity to focus more fully on the role and importance of the Region of Niagara Official Plan;
6. To allow Regional staff to concurrently address Provincial legislation and policy requirements for the Region of Niagara Official Plan, particularly as they relate to the Provincial Policy Statement; A Place to Grow, Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, Niagara Escarpment Plan, and the Greenbelt Plan;
7. To identify key issues and themes now, including matters that are shared amongst more than one Regional Councillor; and
8. To examine potential next steps to address issues arising from item seven above, with a view to resolving those issues ahead of formal consideration of a new Region of Niagara Official Plan by Regional Council.

What is outside the scope of this report?

It should be noted that Overlap's assignment does not include matters of municipal governance or restructuring and that this matter was most recently explored by the Provincial government in 2019.

Who should read this document?

This document is meant for all Regional Councillors and staff, as well as for the public to be able to gain insights into the many issues that must be considered in the preparation of a new Region of Niagara Official Plan.

Can the New Region of Niagara Official Plan address or resolve all of the issues we heard?

No, the new Plan cannot address or resolve all of the issues we heard from Regional Councillors. An Official Plan is a legal policy document that guides the use of land over relatively long periods of time. Official Plans designate where growth can occur, areas that are to be protected, and how infrastructure will support the Region's growth and change. However, it is not surprising that related issues beyond the control of the new Official Plan arose, because there are many roles, responsibilities and relationships that go into implementing an Official Plan. For example, lower tier municipalities provide more detailed

land use regulation through their own Official Plans and Zoning By-laws. In addition, Official Plans designate employment areas (i.e. create opportunities), but the strength of existing businesses and the ability to attract new businesses is not controlled by the Plan. Instead, critical success factors for economic development include municipal marketing strategies (led through Economic Development offices), and collaborative, aligned business development relationships amongst all municipalities in the Region.

How do I view the findings of this report ?

This document contains findings and insights based on responses from Regional Councillors during the engagement process and does not constitute a formal statement or position of Regional Council or of Overlap as to what should be done in the future. Instead, the findings and insights in this report are intended to act as a resource from which to explore challenges and opportunities prior to formal consideration of a new Official Plan by Niagara Regional Council [New content here](#).



**“We must look through
many lenses ... the
Pandemic has taught us
how important that is.”**

– ENGAGEMENT PARTICIPANT

Executive Summary

Overlap has been retained by the Region of Niagara to support research for the proposed new Region of Niagara Official Plan.

An Official Plan is a legal document adopted under Ontario's Planning Act, that guides long term growth, preservation, and other aspects of land use planning in municipalities. The process used to create the new Official Plan must be thorough and its content must be clear.

Engagement was offered to all 32 Regional Councillors who have many varied interactions with their constituents. Overlap conducted in-depth interviews with 28 councillors on both the consultation process and the content of the Official Plan. Using grounded theory, Human-Centred Design was used to analyze these interviews, resulting in the development of seven key insights. In response to these insights, a series of ten recommendations have been made. Overlap has identified additional opportunities to further support this process.

Engagement Insights

In our engagement with Regional Councillors, we asked what the Official Plan means to Regional Councillors and their constituents, how Councillors would describe the current state of the Region of Niagara, what challenges and opportunities exist now and in the next 10-20 years, and how Regional Councillors feel about the Official Plan development process.

The insights to follow surfaced from Regional Councillors. They include about where the Region of Niagara is now and the direction for the future that Regional Councillors would like to see reflected in the Official Plan, as well as the process being used to develop this Official Plan.



INSIGHT 1

Build a sustainable Official Plan, guided by a shared vision, to provide a road map for a strong future

INSIGHT 2

Provide clarity on Regional roles and support active municipal collaboration for managing balanced, thoughtful, and sustainable growth

INSIGHT 3

Build a more socially inclusive region by focusing more attention on matters like affordability, diversity, and equity

INSIGHT 4

Maintain the Region's quality of life, and make planning for vibrant, connected communities a priority

INSIGHT 5

Clearly relate the Region's assets to new and sustainable economic growth opportunities

INSIGHT 6

Ensure roles and relationships between the Region and the 12 area municipal governments, and outside the Official Plan, are well aligned

INSIGHT 7

Engage residents and stakeholders in an accessible and transparent process

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the key insights and respond directly to many of the opportunities and challenges raised by Regional Councillors during engagement sessions.



RECOMMENDATION 1

Convene a session with Regional Councillors to discuss a shared long term vision for the new Official Plan, using an approach that includes community and Local Municipal input

RECOMMENDATION 2

Hold additional public information or update sessions in all 12 municipalities, with the associated Regional Councillor(s) and local Municipal staff in attendance

RECOMMENDATION 3

Further collaboration with municipalities to discuss policy implementation and interpretation

RECOMMENDATION 4

Provide plain language information and status updates for Councillors and the public

RECOMMENDATION 5

Continue to dedicate time to building consensus across municipalities on growth areas

RECOMMENDATION 6

Allocate Council meeting time to discuss the key elements of good planning

RECOMMENDATION 7

Explore the ways in which a new Official Plan can support existing business and attract new investment

RECOMMENDATION 8

Explore ways to further community engagement through the Official Plan, particularly in the interests of diversity, equity, and inclusion

RECOMMENDATION 9

Use the findings of this engagement with Regional Councillors as a baseline against which the process used to create the new Official Plan and the content of the Plan can be measured in 2021

RECOMMENDATION 10

Establish a working group of Regional and local Municipal staff to consider future “housekeeping” amendments to the Official Plan

Summary of engagement methods

Through this engagement, we gained a thorough understanding of the perspectives of elected Regional Councillors regarding a new Region of Niagara Official Plan. Engagement was conducted over a period of five weeks in August and September 2020 and was offered to all 32 Regional Councillors. The aim was to listen in a way that honours and reflects the perspectives of all Regional Councillors.

ENGAGEMENT INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING METHODS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Overlap facilitated

45 minute
individual interviews

with a total of

28
councillors

Regional Councillors were invited to submit additional comments thereafter.

Further detail regarding the engagement and design research methodology is included in Appendix A.



Engagement Insights

The following section presents insights that surfaced from Regional Councillors about where the Region of Niagara is now, the direction for the future that Regional Councillors would like to see reflected in the Official Plan, as well as the process being used to develop this Official Plan.

Engagement Insights

INSIGHTS THAT SURFACED FROM REGIONAL COUNCILLORS

INSIGHT 1

Build a sustainable plan, guided by a shared vision, to provide a roadmap for a strong future

A cohesive long-term vision is an important tool for addressing future opportunities and challenges within the region. The Regional Official Plan is an important strategic document, but it also needs to be realistic and flexible enough to address rapid shifts in how we work and live. With the Pandemic, people saw how quickly circumstances could change.

Alongside great opportunities (like a strong agricultural base and extensive natural areas and systems), there are also significant potential challenges down the road. These include climate change, loss of natural and agricultural land, lack of affordable housing, and difficulty retaining young people. The Regional Official Plan is an important tool to help get ahead of these challenges and draw on the strength and diversity of 13 municipalities working together for a common objective: to build a realistic and sustainable Official Plan for growth, while protecting what makes Niagara a great place to live.

What we heard:

- The Official Plan's 30-year time frame is a long way out, but the Official Plan is a necessary legal road map
- The Official Plan must be reviewed every five years, which gives Council the chance to ensure it remains current and effective
- The Official Plan is a valuable guide when properly utilized
- The Official Plan needs to be accurate, realistic, and flexible
- The region needs a sustainable Official Plan that addresses environmental protection and the challenges of climate change
- The Official Plan needs to provide clear parameters for infilling and intensification in order to protect the green belt and reduce urban sprawl
- A clear and widely supported vision will allow the Region of Niagara to be more united in advocating to senior government levels for targeted investment

Quotes:

"The biggest thing is preparing for growth"

"Niagara is finally finding its footing"

"Build from sustainability"

"We must look through many lenses... the Pandemic has taught us how important that is"

"Council needs a vision to rally around"

"Convene a session with Regional Councillors on what are good planning principles"

"Despite our differences, this Council works really well together, has respect for each other, and really cares about our region"

INSIGHT 2

Provide clarity on Regional roles and support active municipal collaboration for managing balanced, thoughtful, and sustainable growth

The Region of Niagara has many great opportunities for growth. With growth however, come challenges. The Region of Niagara needs a clear strategy for managing growth, encouraging innovation, and finding creative solutions to land development obstacles. All of these need to meet the diverse and unique needs of municipalities. A simplified process for considering development, with clear definitions of Regional and Local Municipal roles, can provide greater clarity.

A smart approach to growth that reconciles development and conservation, and uses sustainability principles to help support a high quality of life, is vital to future prosperity. The Regional Official Plan should identify immediate and longer term growth possibilities. Regional Councillors who were interviewed did not want to see the region become a bedroom community. Avoiding this outcome will require making employment lands available, attracting new businesses, and strongly supporting existing businesses to remain vital and to make new investments. This growth needs to be thoughtful and sustainable—preserving the heritage, natural environment, and agricultural traditions that make the Region of Niagara such a great place. However, as previously noted in this report, the Official Plan has an important but limited role in supporting economic prosperity, and it should be foundational to broader municipal economic development strategies.

What we heard:

- The Regional Official Plan should identify immediate and longer term growth possibilities with clarity and authority
- The Region of Niagara needs a strategy to identify and prioritize growth areas
- Limited revenues, financial reserves, and debt will be restrictive to infrastructure improvements
- The Region of Niagara needs to encourage more innovative, creative, and flexible approaches to growth and meeting challenges
- Manage growth to ensure that the region does not become a bedroom community
- The Region of Niagara needs a land development policy that balances municipal desires for growth with a general desire to limit urban sprawl
- Despite all of the challenges around the Pandemic, Niagara Region is still headed in the right direction
- The Region of Niagara needs a viable strategy to create new employment lands that could be especially used for industrial, commercial, and institutional expansion.

Quotes:


"Be creative and intentional in managing growth"

"The term "sustainable" has fiscal, development, health services, and environmental dimensions"

"Niagara is unlike any other region, and the protection of agricultural land, environmental areas and built heritage is key to our future"

"We've grown within our means so far"

"The Summer Games have shown how well we can work together when we are truly collaborative"

A blue-tinted photograph of an orchard. In the foreground, a metal A-frame ladder leans against a tree. The trees are filled with green leaves and some small, round fruits, likely peaches or nectarines. The background shows more trees and a clear sky. The overall mood is peaceful and agricultural.

“Niagara is unlike any other region, and the protection of agricultural land, environmental areas and built heritage is key to our future.”

– ENGAGEMENT PARTICIPANT

INSIGHT 3

Build a more socially inclusive region by focusing more attention on matters like affordability, diversity, and equity

The Official Plan plays an important role in supporting the social needs of its residents. The diversity that we celebrate can only be maintained through policies that ensure all residents feel welcome and supported in the region. In interviews, we heard time and again that affordable housing is a significant issue, and the Official Plan needs to address it directly.

Housing affordability is also an equity issue; it is a key building block for encouraging diversity and equality. People worry about growing divisions between residents, especially around economic inequality. Young people can no longer afford homes in the region and homelessness increasingly affects a broader range of residents. Overall, people want to see socially inclusive policies that celebrate diversity and address poverty. Strong supports for seniors is also a key priority for Regional Councillors, including supports to age in place and new long term care facilities.

What we heard:

- The Region of Niagara should celebrate diversity and prioritize socially inclusive policies
- The Regional Official Plan needs a housing strategy that addresses affordability, availability, and homelessness
- The region is diverse, with clear divisions between newcomers and existing residents, urban and rural areas, and more and less affluent areas
- Overall the region is experiencing prosperity, but some residents are still struggling
- Seniors need more support to be able to stay in their local communities.

Quotes:

"Incentives should be included to create new affordable housing"

"We need to show more of our openness to diversity and equity and to reflect this in our Plan"

"More supports for seniors and long term care home beds are high priorities"

"Poverty reduction should be reflected in the new Plan"

"We are a compassionate set of communities and need to show that part of us more"

INSIGHT 4

Maintain the Region's quality of life and make planning for vibrant, connected communities a priority

Niagara residents enjoy a great quality of life. Communities are connected and friendly. Recreation facilities, trails, restaurants, wineries, waterfront, and an impressive natural environment make the region a very desirable place to live. This quality of life needs to be preserved with further investments in healthcare, expansion of the trail systems, creation of walkable communities, a robust public transit system, and a clear plan to keep the many communities of the Region of Niagara connected.

Growth is unavoidable. Newcomers want to come to the region for the same reasons that existing residents want to stay. But growth in the wrong places, in the wrong ways, could take away those things that make the region so liveable. Planning for growth must be intentional; it must account for the things that make each community unique and ensure that vibrancy, conservancy, and sustainability remain at the forefront of development choices.

What we heard:

- Quality of life is now a better known strength of the region and the Regional Official Plan needs to intentionally support it
- The Regional Official Plan needs to have a shared vision, but also reflect differences between communities and areas
- The linking of regional transit and the expansion of the GO system have been great, but further investment in transportation is still required to enhance connections and travel times
- The Region of Niagara needs a strategy to continue to support community growth and vibrancy
- Further investment in health care is essential to address challenges such as mental illness and the opioid crisis
- As an attractive place for seniors to live, the region needs strong investment in health care and long-term care in order to support this constituency
- Want to continue to expand investment in walkable communities, trail systems between communities, and recreational facilities like those built to support the Canada Games

- Need policies to protect municipalities from negative practices such as people dumping fill from elsewhere
- The Regional Official Plan needs to establish stronger policies to regulate the cannabis industry to preserve agricultural land and reduce impact on neighbouring properties

Quotes:

"Find ways to open up large growth areas as well as smaller areas that suit their local community environment"

"New communities will have higher densities and must be designed well"

"Connected and coordinated transit systems are key to healthy communities"

"Be community-minded... we are all different communities"

"We need walkable communities connected to one another by trails and transit"

INSIGHT 5

Clearly relate the Region's assets to new and sustainable economic growth opportunities

Tourism and agriculture will always be important pillars in our regional economy, but the Pandemic has taught us that we need to support innovation in these sectors. A diversified economy can help retain young people, and linking this economy with post-secondary institutions helps attract new employers eager to capitalize on a uniquely skilled workforce. Economic development of this kind requires an integrated regional lens, and would benefit from a comprehensive and well-coordinated economic development strategy.

The region is in a great position to leverage assets such as post-secondary institutions, proximity to the GTA and the US border, the Welland Canal, and a growing agri-tourism industry. Managing these economic opportunities requires partnership and collaboration across tiers of government. Diversifying the economy needs to be a group effort and everyone benefits when the Region of Niagara and the Local Municipalities are moving together toward common goals.

What we heard:

- Post-secondary institutions are important to the Region of Niagara and can be further leveraged through partnerships

- A Regional approach is needed for attracting, retaining, and diversifying key employers
- The Region of Niagara's agricultural focus must be maintained to encourage agri-innovation
- Tourism represents a major pillar of the Region of Niagara's economy, but will need to be innovative to leverage future trends and mitigate threats
- Proximity to GTA and USA offer opportunities for growth, but also creates impacts that need to be considered
- The region struggles to offer the kinds of jobs and experiences that young people are interested in
- Understanding new workplace trends and building high quality internet infrastructure would help diversify the job market and enable community engagement
- The Welland Canal is a significant asset that could be used to improve transportation, support the tourism industry, and grow goods movement within and outside of Canada

Quotes:

"Asset management requires more attention and the reserves need to be better funded"


"Use the new Plan as an economic driver, especially to be clear to developers as to what the rules and expectations are"

"We don't want to be a bedroom community"

"We should be leveraging our post secondary institutions and hospitals (including the new hospital) to create new economic opportunities"

"We need to either enhance existing highways or look at a new highway corridor that would especially help the more southerly municipalities to have better travel times"

"There is so much potential for more eco-tourism"



**“We should be leveraging our
post secondary institutions and
hospitals (including the new
hospital) to create new
economic opportunities.”**

— ENGAGEMENT PARTICIPANT

INSIGHT 6

Ensure roles and relationships between the Region and the 12 area municipal governments, and outside the Official Plan, are well aligned

Currently, there is good collaboration between the Region of Niagara and the Local Municipalities. When all the municipalities work together, great things happen. The 2021 Canada Games bid and the expansion of GO transit to the region are both great examples of what can be achieved when everyone is working toward a common goal.

People don't just want a simple Official Plan, but also a simplification of the planning processes that implement the Plan. When requirements are inconsistent, unclear, or complex, processes become slow. The region would benefit from standardizing planning applications and processes across all 13 municipalities, ensure the clear and transparent application of planning policies and regulations, and streamline the administration of development applications. We understand that this simplification has already been initiated by Regional and Local Municipal staff, and this demonstrates strong collaboration toward another common goal. Regional government is working well, there is optimism amongst the current Council, and successful collaboration is happening.

What we heard:

- Regardless of municipal structure, there is an opportunity to simplify the relationship between all municipalities, allowing for more efficient service provision
- Simplicity will increase everyone's understanding of the Official Plan
- A standard planning process across the region should balance Regional and local planning expertise and contexts
- There are great recent examples of all of the municipalities working well together and this kind of closer collaboration should continue
- The Region of Niagara needs to maintain public trust through transparency

Quotes:

"Simplify planning processes"

"The municipal CAOs are all working together to come up with ways to be operating more efficiently"

"I don't understand why there aren't common development (application) forms for all municipalities"

"Planning policies and procedures must align among all municipalities"

INSIGHT 7

Engage residents and stakeholders in an accessible and transparent process

The Official Plan development process has been transparent, and many councillors feel that it is being handled very well. The Region of Niagara has a strong track record of public consultation. For example, in Fall 2020, 28 community engagement sessions related to the natural environment were held, 26 of which were convened on 15 consecutive days. This kind of proactive community engagement can further the objectives of an Official Plan process that is fair, transparent, and collaborative. Ensuring that everyday citizens understand how the Official Plan impacts them, and feel that their voices are being heard, is important for building engagement and ensuring legitimacy.

Currently, there are also significant barriers to public consultation. Pandemic restrictions make in-person consultations not possible. However, digital consultations are not always accessible to everyone. A combination of different forms of engagement processes is desirable. Interest in the Official Plan is strong amongst certain key stakeholders: environmental groups, the agricultural sector, developers, and constituents directly affected by adjacent development. Engaging “the general public” with little knowledge of the Official Plan can be difficult. Local Municipalities are well connected to their constituents and should be invited to be more involved to support this process in their communities.

What we heard:

- Interest in the Official Plan is strongest amongst constituents who are directly impacted by adjacent development
- Official Plan needs to reflect values of environmental and heritage protection
- The Official Plan process needs broad engagement which is authentic, fair, and transparent
- Having strong municipal engagement is important because municipalities engage so closely with constituents and are the front line of local democracy
- The Official Plan development needs to be a collaborative process that provides a voice to municipalities based on a shared vision
- Maintaining buy-in from key stakeholders contributes to a planning process that works well and has legitimacy
- A combination of more in-person and digital public consultations would make participation in the process more accessible

Quotes:

"The process being used has been very positive, open, and supportive"

"People most affected should be advised of the new Plan"

"Information given to the public should be in plain language and broken down well"

"Make sure Councillors have ready access to information to share with their constituents"

A background image of a park with several young trees, a paved path, and a flagpole with multiple flags. The image is overlaid with a dark blue semi-transparent filter. A small red rectangular graphic element is positioned above the title.

Recommendations & Possible Next Steps

The following recommendations are derived from the key insights and respond directly to many of the opportunities and challenges raised by Regional Councillors during engagement sessions.

Recommendations & Possible Next Steps

DERIVED FROM THE KEY INSIGHTS AND RESPOND TO OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

RECOMMENDATION 1

Convene a session with Regional Councillors to discuss a shared long term vision for the new Official Plan, using an approach that includes community and Local Municipal input

The Region of Niagara should convene a working session with Regional Councillors to discuss their ideas for a shared, longer term vision in the proposed Region of Niagara Official Plan. Consensus on a working draft of a planning-based vision (i.e. with no formal endorsement) would provide Regional staff with a better understanding as to how Council believes the Region of Niagara should be shaped well into the future. This would particularly help staff to try to align the Official Plan's detailed content with this draft vision. There are many ways to approach developing such a vision. For example, the Council session could be based on public input made to date, or alternately, could be preceded by a community survey. Assembling land use visions that are currently in place or are being developed by the Local Municipalities would be helpful as well. Ultimately, it is critical that Council approve a plan that contains a clear vision statement (of some type), as external bodies (e.g. the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal, Provincial courts) may ultimately issue decisions in cases of appeal. Some members of Council have also noted that it is time to "think differently" and referenced the impacts of the Pandemic as both challenges and opportunities. For example, new and different opportunities relative to the Welland Canal were frequently raised by Councillors—especially as Canada begins to consider more and stronger domestic supply chains and as highways are heavily congested.

Recommended timing: Winter 2021

RECOMMENDATION 2

Hold additional public information or update sessions in all 12 municipalities, with the associated Regional Councillor(s) and Local Municipal staff in attendance

Regional staff should work to convene additional public information sessions in all Local Municipalities. It would be beneficial to have the associated Local Municipal Planning staff attend, and while they would not “represent” the Official Plan, they could assist in discussing issues with constituents. Regional Councillors who were elected from the respective Local Municipality should also attend. It is important for the community to have a number of different opportunities to review material and to comment, regardless of the number of people who choose to do so. The format options are variable, ranging from Public Information Centres (i.e. open houses) to in-public updates made to each Local Municipality, desirably at a Council meeting.

Recommended timing: Immediate

RECOMMENDATION 3

Further collaboration with municipalities to discuss policy implementation and interpretation

As the new Official Plan is drafted, Regional staff should work with the 12 Local Municipalities (especially CAOs, Planners and Economic Development Officers) to discuss how the policies would be implemented locally, and to pre-emptively resolve as many differences in policy interpretation as possible. It would also be valuable to revisit previous instances where policy interpretation under the current Official Plan resulted in differences of professional opinion or where the Official Plan is silent. A number of Regional Councillors referenced instances where the intent and application of planning policies were understood differently between Regional and Local Municipal staff. Since the Plan is important to support economic development, further collaboration with the CAOs and Economic Development Officers should assist these positions to implement strategies that are beyond the control of the Official Plan.

Recommended timing: Convene while the Official Plan is being drafted

RECOMMENDATION 4

Provide plain language information and status updates for Councillors and the public

The Region of Niagara should further supplement its information about the proposed Official Plan through new and short information documents that use plain language to explain the role of the Official Plan and its (proposed) contents to the public. A document that discusses the key elements of good planning and short updates on the status of the Official Plan would also be helpful. It is critical that the plain language conveys information in a non-technical manner and that all forms of media be used (e.g. newspapers, websites, social media). These documents should be readily accessible to all Regional and Local Municipal Councillors as well in order to support the information needs of constituents who contact them directly.

Recommended timing: Immediate

RECOMMENDATION 5

Continue to dedicate time to building consensus across municipalities on growth areas

Meetings between Regional and Local Municipal staff should be dedicated to work toward administrative consensus on both major and lesser growth areas. This would be expected to focus on residential areas and strategic employment lands. While it is recognized that Provincial legislation and policy, such as A Place to Grow, Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, can be directive, it is very desirable that a cohesive Official Plan for the Region of Niagara be developed that is both supported and is implementable by all 13 municipalities. This would include such considerations as planning and financing for new or upgraded infrastructure and the protection of significant areas (e.g. natural and built heritage resources, key agricultural areas). Ultimately, this will assist the Regional Council in making its decisions about where it will designate growth areas.

Recommended timing: Fall 2020/Winter 2021

RECOMMENDATION 6

Allocate Council meeting time to discuss the key elements of good planning

A block of time should be allocated in one or more Council meetings (or in other formats) to discuss key requirements, directions, and “good planning” encouragement made by the Province of Ontario to the Region of Niagara (and all municipalities), as well as what constitutes good planning more specifically in the Region of Niagara. One Councillor noted that while good planning is fundamental, Council has not had the time to discuss what it really means for Niagara region. Again, there are many ways to undertake this discussion, such as inviting an externally recognized community builder to present and lead a discussion. The attendance and participation by Regional staff would also be beneficial.

Recommended timing: Winter/Spring 2021

RECOMMENDATION 7

Explore the ways in which a new Official Plan can support existing business and attract new investment

Regional Council should explore ways of using the new Official Plan as the basis for attracting new investment. One member of Council spoke about having an Official Plan that everyone could “rally around”, while another member of Council described the need to have a clear “rule book” as to what good planning looks like (and is required) in the Region of Niagara. This includes both business retention and expansion as well as business attraction. Many Councillors expressed their expectation that the Region of Niagara will be increasingly attractive and will experience considerably more annual growth in the future than in the past. There also appear to be signs of new growth in the Region of Niagara which may be linked to relocation preferences of businesses and households as a result of the Pandemic. These Councillor insights seem to align with the context of Recommendation 5, which focuses on achieving consensus around where the major and lesser growth areas should be. It should again be noted that the Official Plan cannot ensure or deliver economic development, and instead helps to create opportunities and other favourable conditions.

Recommended timing: After a new Official Plan is approved by Council

RECOMMENDATION 8

Explore ways to further community engagement through the Official Plan, particularly in the interests of diversity, equity, and inclusion

In preparing a new Region of Niagara Official Plan, the Region of Niagara should ensure that both the process used to engage the community and the content of the new Official Plan intentionally support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Any actions required as a result of the Region of Niagara's decision to join the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities should also be taken. Initiatives targeted toward more engagement by younger people could also support broader youth retention strategies throughout the region. A commitment to advancing municipal inclusion initiatives was evident amongst the interviewed Councillors.

Recommended timing: Immediate

RECOMMENDATION 9

Use the findings of this engagement with Regional Councillors as a baseline against which the process used to create the new Official Plan and the content of the Official Plan can be measured in 2021

Regional Councillors should review the findings of this engagement exercise in approximately one year's time to see how the findings of the Overlap final report have been addressed by Regional staff in the proposed Region of Niagara Official Plan. Using a simple dashboard approach (e.g. in progress, partially complete, complete) would give Council a readily usable gauge of progress. Many Councilors interviewed cited the challenges of communicating progress being made in planning for key priority areas like growth management and environmental protection. As noted previously in this report, however, the new Regional Official Plan cannot "deliver" on all of the comments and expectations made by Regional Council in the interviews, as some roles and actions lie outside of Regional planning, and consequently should not be a measure of progress made in preparing the new Official Plan.


Recommended timing: Fall 2021

RECOMMENDATION 10

Establish a working group of Regional and Local Municipal staff to consider future “housekeeping” amendments to the Plan

An implementation working group of regional and local municipal staff (from all 12 Local Municipalities) should ultimately be convened. New Official Plans of the type to be brought into the Region of Niagara can require subsequent “housekeeping changes” through a comprehensive amendment to the Official Plan. This also provides the opportunity to further clarify language that may not have been understood by users as expected. This would be in addition to the review of the new Official Plan every five years by Regional Council as required by the Province under the *Planning Act*.

Recommended timing: After a new Official Plan is approved by Council and a Notice of Decision is issued by the Province



Appendix A: Methodologies

Human-Centred Design (“Design Thinking”)

Human-centred design (HCD), popularly known as “design thinking,” is an iterative, collaborative approach to problem-solving.

We “de-risk” problem-solving by co-designing with end users, building solutions in small testable steps, and collecting feedback while there’s still time to improve the results. The most important thing about solving problems with HCD is that it keeps the stakeholders at the heart of the process.



In HCD, problems are defined and described by the people who deal with them. Research includes consulting individuals with lived experience and testing prototypes of our solutions with feedback from real stakeholders. HCD comes from many design disciplines, but because of its intentional focus on people’s experiences, HCD is as useful for designing interfaces, systems, and services as it is for consumer products. HCD is how we put creativity and empathy to work to solve problems.

Engagement Methodology

Why Design Research

Design research provides the practical underpinnings of human-centred design. It is research conducted to understand people’s experiences in order to design—or redesign—services, programs, or products for those people. We use the methods of design itself—such as behavioural observation and iterative prototyping—to gather and synthesize information. Then we reason abductively—that is, like Sherlock Holmes—looking for the simplest, most likely explanations for our observations.

Often, our insights will be better communicated with artifacts than reports. Design research is especially well-suited to developing clarity in complex or changing situations with many varied stakeholders. Consequently, it is the foundation of user experience design, service design, community engagement, and foresight. Design research is how we understand people's needs.

Design Research also allows us to:

Be exploratory - When we prepare our initial research strategy, we intentionally use qualitative research methods at the outset. Using open-ended research questions as we conduct qualitative methods provides space for stakeholders to voice what matters to them rather than prescribing their needs for them.

Be flexible and rigorous - By being intentional with the qualitative process of asking open-ended questions, we're able to identify meaningful patterns at early stages and adapt our process accordingly. Afterwards, we can use quantitative methods to focus and hone our data. This flexibility means we can strategically optimize our time and effort while preserving the rigour of our data.

Consider outlying data - At Overlap, each piece of data that we collect is tied to a need or insight expressed by someone—we treat outlying data with as much care as we do with people. Where outlying data can often be overlooked in wider-scale, quantitative research studies, design research allows for a deeper dive into why these outlying pieces of data exist. And more often than not, this uncovers insights about what's missing or deficient about the current system.

Synthesis Methodology

Grounded Theory

One of our most fruitful approaches is grounded theory, so-called because it produces a theory grounded in the data. This is an inductive research method developed for the social sciences by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. Instead of predetermining the topics of interest, we watch the key topics emerge from the observations and organize the observations around those topics to surface apparent patterns or categories.

This is research for discovery and insight. Grounded theory is an exploratory, descriptive method for developing hypotheses about what's going on. When it is important to measure and locate the impact of the situation, we would complement grounded theory with quantitative follow-up research. Grounded theory is how we turn interviews, observations, and interactions into insights. We allow concepts and themes to emerge and ensure that as many experiences as possible can be bubbled up to decision makers.

Using Insights for Inclusive Design

At Overlap, when we talk about inclusive design we mean that we design solutions and processes that adapt to the varied needs of individuals—people who have barriers to access a service or product for any reason. First and foremost, approaching our work with the lens of Inclusive Design helps us consider the varied and diverse needs of the stakeholders we’re designing for and with.

Additionally, inclusive design gives us a better strategy to create effective solutions. When we face a lot of quantitative data and generalizations, we’re tempted to design solutions that meet the needs of the average user. At Overlap, our qualitative insights help us consider the needs of users that find themselves with unique barriers to service. By addressing the needs of people at the extremes of an experience, we often solve for many more people than if we focused on average.

**This Insights Report has been developed collaboratively
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absolutely
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