

# Case-in-Point 2022



Figure 1. Historic Downtown in the Greenbelt

## Enabling Complete Rural Communities Across the Region The Greater Golden Horseshoe Strategy

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### 1.0 Introduction

Complete communities offer residents a range of services to cover all their needs within one place. They are compact, walkable, provide a mix of housing options, and use infrastructure in an efficient way (Ohland & Brooks, 2012). However, rural municipalities (RMs) face unique challenges when trying to make their communities more complete. A regional approach is important to support and coordinate the development of compact and complete communities (Hornell & Walker, 2003). RMs in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) identify seven aspects for the development of complete communities and provide best practice for their application in rural areas (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020).

*“High density [...] is not a prerequisite for a decent and humane urban environment; rather it is the result of one, a result, that is, of the establishment of a place in which many would like to live”  
- Neal Payton, 1996, p.169*

## 2.0 Background and Context

RMs in the GGH have been experiencing population growth and an increasing number of residents commuting from rural municipalities to cities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Residential growth has been developed usually in the form of low-density subdivision and strip development along arterial highways.

Making rural communities more complete is critical as their population grows to help reduce the encroachment of incompatible development and agricultural lands fragmentation, improve overall health, and build resiliency across the region. The creation of complete rural communities is one of the core regional objectives within the *Greenbelt Plan* (2017) and the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* (2006) (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020).

Historic settlement areas represent original models of complete communities with many desirable attributes such as being compact and walkable built environments that provide diverse housing options and a mix of land uses that provide a diversity of services to satisfy

residents' daily needs (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020, p.10). Therefore, historic centres in downtowns are identified as blueprints for the incorporation of amenities and the transformation of rural communities into more complete areas.



Figure 2. Ontario's Greenbelt

## 3.0 Case Summary

This section provides an overview of the main interrelated aspects identified in the GGH as priorities for the development of complete rural communities.

### Growth Management

Rural regional municipalities have been developing policies to direct their growth toward existing serviced areas such as downtowns and corridors. Infrastructure capacity determines where growth can be accommodated with lower operating costs. Servicing constraints limit municipalities to support higher-density housing types (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020, p.14).

Promoting population growth and higher residential densities in small towns helps to sustain existing amenities and services and to justify improvements (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020, p.16).

Main opportunities and challenges:

- Increased pressure on municipal resources where growth was not expected. RMs are developing growth management studies to better understand their servicing capacity.
- Residents have concerns on traffic issues since there is often a lack of clarity on how higher densities would look like. Municipalities are engaging with their residents to discuss their concerns and help them understand the processes and impacts of growth.

### Housing

RMs have created policies and zoning by-laws that permit and promote higher densities (see figure 3), diverse housing types including secondary and garden suites, and mixed-use development. Housing options are being diversified to address the needs of



different population groups such as seniors looking to downsize, young families looking to rent, or workers in the seasonal tourism industry looking for affordable housing. Some municipalities have also identified the interest of their residents to turn vacant units above stores in downtown into apartments (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020).

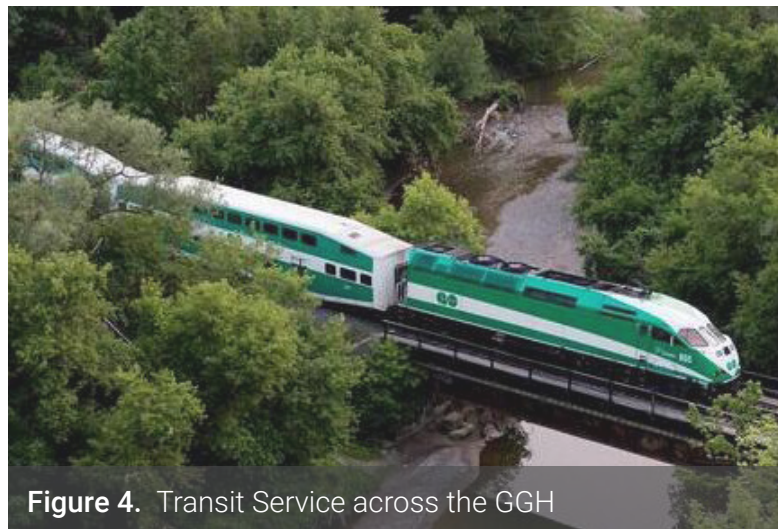
Some RMs are offering incentives through their Community Improvement Plans (CIP) to encourage rental housing and affordability. Grey Highlands is waiving administration permit fees for secondary suites and offering grants for building permits and tax increment equivalent grants to promote infill and redevelopment (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020, p.20).

Main opportunities and challenges:

- Residents are concerned over the impact of higher density developments in the character and traffic of their communities. There is a stigma associated with rental housing and renters.
- It is difficult for RMs to attract developers to invest in diverse and affordable housing, as there is perception multi-unit developments are in low demand and unprofitable. Municipalities can offer grant programs through their CIP to make diverse house development more attractive to developers.



**Figure 3.** Housing Diversity in the Greenbelt



**Figure 4.** Transit Service across the GGH

## Public and Active Transportation

Regional transit systems are essential in rural communities because of the high number of residents commuting long distances across the region. RMs are establishing two types of public transportation systems: fixed-route transit with scheduled routes and times (see figure 4), and on-demand transit (ODT). Clearview and Pelham have implemented their own fixed-route transit systems through external grant programs, while lower-density communities are opting for ODT. Caledon is offering ODT to access health appointments, post-secondary education, and employment training (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020).

In addition, active transportation infrastructure is often restricted to recreational purposes in rural communities. Municipalities are looking to connect trail systems to destination areas and to incorporate cycling infrastructure to provide alternative commuting options.

Main opportunities and challenges:

- Large geographies with low densities make it difficult to support investment in public and active transit. Service clusters help to identify destination routes.
- Rural roads are usually not designed to accommodate public and active transit modes, they often lack walking and cycling infrastructure. Road reconstruction requires upfront capital and operating costs. Grant programs can help municipalities to implement pilot projects.



**Figure 5.** Agricultural Lands in Creemore, ON

## Economic Development

RMs aim to provide and retain local jobs that enable residents to live and work in the community, requiring a concerted effort to diversify their economies from traditional activities by focusing on developing place-based assets such as historic downtowns, agricultural and natural heritage (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020).

Main opportunities and challenges:

- Lack of affordable housing decreases the ability of local businesses to attract and retain workers. Providing diverse housing options at different price points can help more people stay in the community.
- Lack of transportation options reduces the ability of local business to access the labour force. Higher densities at key locations incentivize gradual investments on transportation.
- The lack of reliable broadband internet is a hindrance on economic development in rural areas. Municipalities and regional authorities have developed their own broadband strategies, which can be implemented in conjunction with Federal, and Provincial efforts.

## Character

Most communities are proud of their distinct character. However, defining what the individual “character” of a community is can be difficult. For example, character can be associated with the physical built form and design of settlement areas, or it can also be associated with the natural environment and agricultural

heritage in the surroundings. Clearly identifying the character of each community is necessary to understand what should be protected (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020).

Main opportunities and challenges:

- Residents often resist changes perceived as a departure from the small-town character of their communities. RMs can benefit from helping residents visualize complete communities in their rural environment.
- Character is also a social component that gives each community a cherished identity to be protected. Municipalities can support the protection of their social character through initiatives that fulfill the needs of residents of all incomes and backgrounds through supportive services and diverse housing and transit options.

## Agriculture and Environment

Agriculture and the natural environment are an important part of the economy and character of rural areas (see figure 5). However, their agricultural and natural assets can be impacted by inadequate growth and the encroachment of incompatible land uses. The encroachment of non-farm related development into agricultural areas has the potential to create land use conflicts, promote land fragmentation and increase the cost of farmland (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020, p.14).

Main opportunities and challenges:

- Scattered low density development can degrade the qualities that make an area suitable for agricultural activities. It is important to establish firm urban boundaries



to protect agricultural and natural assets. Municipalities can benefit from promoting infill development that takes advantage of the services already available at key locations, helping to reduce encroachment and fragmentation of agricultural lands.

- Traditional agricultural practices can be perceived as a nuisance by people not

## 4.0 Outcomes

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The Greenbelt Foundation (2021) has identified the following outcomes due to municipal actions to make their communities more complete in the GGH:

*Growth Management & Economic Development:* Municipalities have noted businesses on their Main Streets have increased clientele due to new residents (p.16).

*Housing:* More apartment and condominium projects are being developed. The Municipality of Grey Highlands is receiving more applications for secondary suites and multi-storey commercial units are upgrading upper floors residential units (p.20).

*Public and active transportation:* Municipalities implementing public transit systems have increased access to educational and employment opportunities, recreation, and health services. In 2018, the Town of Caledon was awarded a *Bike-Friendly Community Designation* (see figure 6). One of its projects was the conversion of a rail line running east-west across the town into a multi-use trail (p.28).

## 5.0 Lessons Learned

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Planning for complete rural communities can help local governments to direct growth towards serviced areas and allocate resources efficiently for the benefit of all. However, due to the variety of sizes, demographics, and locations of rural communities, it is impossible to set equal expectations for all of them. Complete rural communities can complement each other through a connected network that provides access to all the necessary services. Regional planning is fundamental to achieve

used to living near agricultural operations. Education campaigns to familiarize people with farm practices can help reduce friction and resources spent dealing with complaints.

*Character:* In Clearview, residents viewed a new 4-storey retirement home positively, even though it is taller than the surrounding buildings because it would allow seniors to stay in their community (p.21).

*Agriculture:* Clarington is decreasing boundary issues between residential development and agricultural areas by implementing spatial separation strategies that incorporate road, trail, or trees between these land uses (p.47).

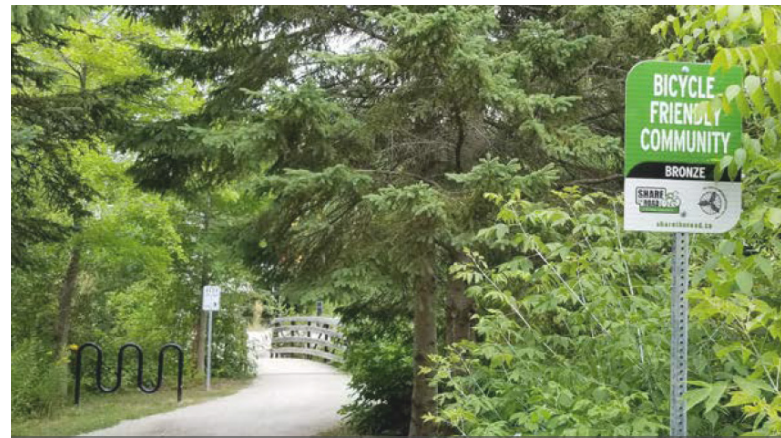
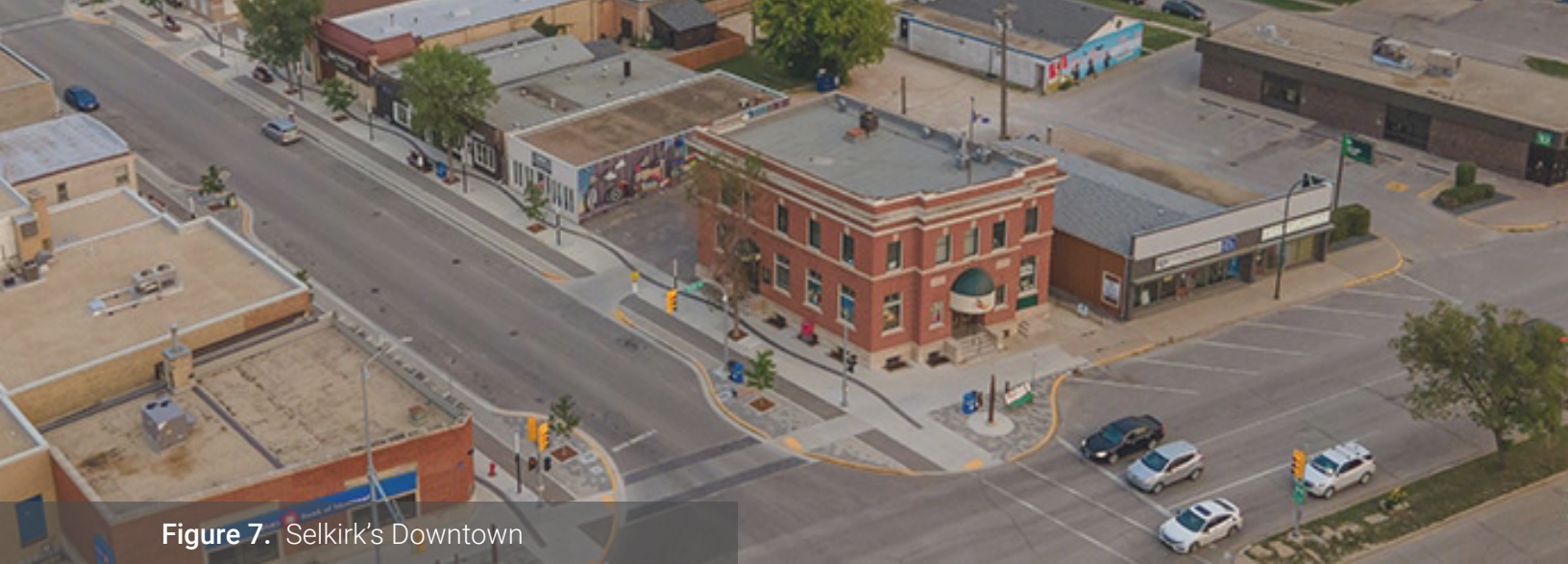


Figure 6. Bike-Friendly Caledon, ON

this vision, since it promotes collaboration between different jurisdictions sharing a variety of resources and best practice.

RMs in the GGH have provided lessons on a variety of challenges and strategies:

- Policies that delineate exactly where and how much growth is going to be accommodated are needed to help municipalities to plan for housing, transportation, and services in the long-term.



**Figure 7.** Selkirk's Downtown

- Increasing density and housing diversity is only possible after RMs have upgraded their servicing infrastructure.
- It is critical to achieve public buy-in and to inform the public about what growth will entail and where it will happen. Public engagement strategies help to address concerns and to clarify the impact of change.
- Pilot projects help to introduce new initiatives (e.g., public transit, secondary suites) where public buy-in may be difficult to obtain and demand levels are uncertain.
- Compact growth in settlement areas helps to reduce the amount of impacted land. Preventing the fragmentation of agricultural lands helps to enhance the local economy and to preserve the rural character of the community.

In Manitoba, rural municipalities are aiming for complete communities too. The City of Selkirk

has developed a *Downtown Secondary Plan* (2014) and a *Downtown Renewal Strategy* (2016) to identify priorities and guide investments. Their vision is to create a vibrant downtown that serves as a hub for residential, business, and recreation activities, while preserving surrounding natural resources (LNG, 2016)(see figure 7). As a result, Selkirk is experiencing increases in investments for residential multi-unit developments and local businesses. However, as learned from the GGH, this would be only a first step towards the creation of complete communities in rural Manitoba. The Winnipeg Metropolitan Region (WMR) has developed draft *Plan20-50* (WMR, 2021) to promote regional collaboration, but this is still under review. Understanding complete rural communities' unique characteristics is critical to create a successful regional framework that supports its members.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Developing short-term solutions to address complex problems in rural areas requires constant investment from local governments. RMs need to identify the real cause of their issues and design long-term strategies that make development sustainable in their communities over the following decades. Making rural communities more complete represents a long-term strategy that addresses these issues. "A rural municipality may consider

itself complete at the municipal-level when all their settlement areas and rural areas combined meet the majority of residents' daily needs" (Greenbelt Foundation, 2020, p.55). Complete rural communities require an integrated approach from different jurisdictions and government levels. We can develop a more complete rural Manitoba, we have learned regional collaboration is the key.

## 7.0 References

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### Figure List

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