Communities in Transition: Planning for No-Growth, Slow Growth or Decline

Mark Seasons, School of Planning, University of Waterloo
Introduction

This paper examines the phenomenon of slow growth, no growth or decline and the associated impacts in Ontario’s mid-sized cities. The paper raises and addresses two questions: what is the nature of the slow growth/no growth/decline phenomenon in Ontario’s mid-sized cities? And, how might planning practice address the challenges associated with non-growth? The intent is to establish the basis for a future analysis of municipal planning responses to slow/no growth or decline in Ontario’s mid-sized cities.

Context

Economic and population growth has been the dominant policy objective during the post-war period in Canada. Growth has long been framed as something that should be promoted and extolled – a source of pride and sign of progress for communities (Victor, 2008). In this context, growth is always a good thing – it is a cultural norm. However, growth cannot be assumed for all communities. The reasons are diverse, complex and inter-connected. They include independent and inter-dependent forces of change such as economic restructuring, globalization, and key demographic trends (e.g. lower fertility rates, aging communities, migration patterns). These issues affect communities of all sizes, including mid-sized cities which are typically under-studied in urban and regional planning (Filion et al., 2007).

Interestingly, there is no widely accepted definition of slow/no growth or decline. The variation in definitions reflects a lack of comprehensive and cross-national research on the subject, cultural differences, and the different ways in which slow/no growth or decline is conceptualized (Schatz, 2010; Weichmann, 2006; Pallagst, 2010). (Hartt, 2016; Donald & Hall, 2015). Hummel (2014, p.399) defines decline as “a city that has experienced population decline over more than two years at a minimum, and is experiencing an economic transformation (shift in economic drivers) and structural crisis that can be identified by certain indicators such as policy decisions.”

Factors that can affect local prospects of growth include:

- the presence (or absence) of senior government planning and/or economic development policy and financial support (Walks, 2015; Taylor & Bradford, 2015)
- demography i.e. low fertility rates, aging communities
- desirability of the city to newcomers who tend to be attracted to large city regions that are multi-cultural and offer a diversified economy (Kobayishi & Preston, 2015; Burayidi, 2015)
- physical proximity to (or distance from) thriving economic regions (Filion & Bunting, 2015; Neptis, 2013)

While Detroit is the poster child in extremis for the slow growth/no growth/decline phenomenon, these trends are particularly prominent in industrialized or mature economies such as Germany, France, Eastern Europe and Japan (Pallagst et al., 2017).

While population loss is one of the most commonly used indicators to understand trends of no growth/shrinking, other indicators can include economic activity, length or duration of population loss, and key socio-economic trends (i.e. rates and duration of unemployment, low birth rates, low income, etc.) (Cunningham-Sabot & Fol, 2009).

For the purpose of this analysis, we refer specifically to population trends, noting that future research should recognize and explore the individual and cumulative impacts of several factors. The following

---

1. The term decline is commonly used in Canadian scholarship. In the United States and Europe, shrinkage is the preferred term.
definitions have been developed to identify communities that have experienced slow/no growth or shrinkage over an extended period (i.e. 15 consecutive years):

- **No growth** is defined as no discernible statistical change in population;
- **Slow growth** areas are defined as having less than 1% annual population growth$^2$; and
- **Declining communities$^3$** are defined as having experienced population loss.

### Impacts of slow growth, no growth, or decline

The viability of a community can be undermined by slow growth, no growth or decline. Struggling communities experience extreme difficulty when attracting new businesses or residents. The local impacts of slow/no-growth or decline are often reflected in fewer employment prospects, constrained or reduced rates of consumption, diminished own-source revenue (i.e. resources generated by municipal government revenue generation tools such as property taxes or development charges), reduced property values, and in the elimination or reduction of public goods and services (i.e. schools, health care, hard services) (Hutton & Vinodrai, 2015; Hall, 2015). Job loss and a generalized sense of anxiety and insecurity can generate health impacts that are significant – to the individual, family and community generally. It is also considered bad politics to acknowledge that a community is in crisis (Hummel, 2014; Donald & Hall, 2015).

The way in which a community is affected by these trends depends in large part on local and regional characteristics – for example, housing stock, condition of infrastructure, tax burden, quality of municipal services, diversity of economic activity, and geography (Schatz, 2009; Mallach, 2011). As a result, no two communities experience these trends in precisely the same manner. While many municipal planning strategies are designed for advancing and favouring growth, this type of approach may be mismatched with the realities of local conditions and fail to address issues related to resident wellbeing. It also indicates that a change to planning strategies that emphasize generating growth may not be suitable (e.g. low-density development on the urban fringe) (Oswalt, 2005; Pallagst, 2010; Sousa & Pinho, 2015).

For example, population loss can occur in areas of economic growth (Franz, 2004; Buhnik, 2010) and could create conditions that maintain or enhance the quality of life for residents (Oswalt & Reiniets, 2006). The impacts of these changes are experienced to a greater or lesser degree depending on geography, local and regional economic structure, and a community’s capacity for resilience (Magis, 2010).

Some Canadian communities will experience continuous and rapid growth while others will experience intermittent periods of growth, stagnation or even prolonged periods of population loss. This is especially the case for resource-oriented communities, places that are outside the commuter shed$^4$ of Canada’s large metropolitan regions, communities with limited natural or cultural amenities, and communities with limited capacity (i.e. financial resources, political leadership, skills and knowledge) to adapt to change (Polese & Shearmur, 2006).

---

2. These criteria were based on Leo and Brown’s (2000) and Turok and Mykhenko’s (2007) definition of slow growth.

3. While there is considerable debate over what constitutes a shrinking city, most definitions agree that population loss is from structural changes to local and national demographic trends and economic systems. Population loss in the majority of Canadian communities is from these structural changes. For more information on defining shrinkage, please see Sousa & Pinho (2015).

4. We define the commuter shed as a radius of 100kms from the core of the central city in a region. See Axisa (2011).
Ontario’s mid-sized Cities

A common indicator of a community’s future prospects is the type and extent of change in population numbers over time. To study the pattern in Ontario’s mid-sized cities, we developed a simple yet informative typology for classifying the pattern of growth (or slow/no growth/decline) by geography. Specifically, we examined the rate and location of population growth (or loss) experienced by mid-sized cities over the 2001-2016 census periods. High growth (HG) communities were categorized as recording population increases of over 20%; medium growth (MG) communities between 10-20%; and slow growth (SG) communities as 0-10%. Decline (DEC) was determined as less than 0% in growth. In all cases, population data were used for the 2001-2016 period as the frame of reference. (See Table 1).

Of the 37 mid-sized cities in Ontario, five have lost population and experienced real decline while 32 have gained population over the 2001-2016 census period. The MSCs that are located in the Greater Golden

Lowest Rates of Growth

% change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THUNDER BAY</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GREATER SUDBURY</td>
<td>+1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KINGSTON</td>
<td>+1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAINT JOHN</td>
<td>-2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAGUENAY</td>
<td>+1.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics Canada/Census 2016
The data suggest that location is important. Proximity to large city-regions does matter and, conversely, increasing distance from these city-regions can negatively affect a community’s prospects. Mid-Sized cities located in peripheral areas (i.e. North) with a traditional resource-based economy also seem vulnerable. However, this is not always the case: communities located in peripheral amenity-rich regions (e.g. BC’s Interior; Collingwood, ON) can prosper, while communities located within a large city-region can experience slow growth, no growth or decline.

Implications and responses

In periods of decline or slow growth, many of these communities will welcome almost any type of external investment in business and urban development (e.g. suburban developments) (Hummel, 2014). While such efforts to retain capital and attract investment are common practice, growth-oriented tools such as taxation relief strategies, marketing, investments in strategic infrastructure (e.g. high-tech, communications systems), and investments in residents’ employability (e.g. training programs for workers) may not be properly aligned with the need to address a slow/no growth or decline situation.

Pallagst et al. (2017a) have identified three typical reactions to the prospects of slow growth or decline:

1. expansive strategy (i.e. economic growth projects, tax incentives)
2. maintenance strategy (i.e. enhancing urban attractiveness, substitute industries, attraction of a university or college);
3. and planning for decline (i.e. right sizing infrastructure, redeveloping vacant urban land, comprehensive planning).

The concern is that some of these strategies could
This policy stance seems rather counter-productive and unrealistic given the realities of slow or no growth, or decline that is experienced in these communities. These communities will need significant support – financial, capacity-building, policies and programs - that are designed to ease this transition. This support should be context-driven and place-based (see Taylor & Bradford, 2015), and it would require sustained commitments from both provincial and federal levels of government.

At the community level, a slow growth/no growth/decline scenario presents challenges for municipal planners whose professional experience would typically have been shaped by the pressures exerted by economic and population growth (Schatz, 2010). The traditional growth management planning tools would be familiar, but probably of limited utility – i.e. secondary plans, statutory planning tools (zoning), subdivision and site plans. Some planners might have experience working in specific neighbourhoods that are in decline, or where demand supports extensive urban regeneration and redevelopment planning efforts (Donald & Hall, 2015). However, community-wide slow growth, stagnation or decline would be another matter. Traditional growth management tools might not be effective (Warkentin, 2012).

The realities of slow and no-growth contexts has implications for urban and regional planning. The reality and challenge is that the planning system is designed primarily to plan for and guide growth-oriented development (Seasons, 2007). As a result, the subject of slow growth/no growth/decline in Ontario and elsewhere is simply not addressed through planning policy at the provincial level.

Policy plans at the provincial level advocate growth and associated development (i.e. Places to Grow; Growth Plan for Northern Ontario). For decades, senior government policies and programs have emphasized and promoted efforts to create economic development opportunities with a growth objective (Simmons & Bourne, 2007).
Where chronic slow/no growth or decline is established, it makes sense to shift the discourse from the traditional focus on growth (or slow growth/no growth/decline) to something quite different. It would be necessary to craft a new future for the community, based on a new definition of “growth” and “development.” Growth would need to be framed in terms of personal growth and as a sense of individual and community wellbeing, achieved in the context of sustainability (Lewis & Donald, 2010).

This, in turn, calls for a different style of planning: one that emphasizes adaptation (Warkentin, 2012). We argue that, as a first step, there is a need to acknowledge the probable future for the community: a slow growth, no growth or decline scenario instead of growth. This would likely be a difficult thing to accept for most communities; one could expect considerable denial and emotion, and well-intentioned floundering in desperation to stabilize things (Schatz, 2017). Without a proper redefinition, communities will continue to cling to the remote possibility of growth (Hummel, 2014). As Simmons and Bourne (2007, p.18) note, “there are powerful forces resisting the loss of population in small communities” and “moving out is usually difficult, sometimes traumatic, and likely expensive.”

Hard choices would have to be made. In that context, we can expect that communities would simply try to carry on as before – the business as usual approach. Residents and businesses would cling to images of past success and growth. Community decision-makers would struggle to attract any form and type of development, regardless of medium and long-term consequences, and to retain existing businesses. There would be a need to (a) decide whether the community has a future, whether it would be viable, and if so, how might it carry on or (b) recognize that the community cannot survive, which would call for adaptation strategies.

There would be a need to manage slow growth, no growth or especially decline. The challenges would be to find context-specific ways to manage decline that are “practical, economically efficient, and socially equitable for those places and people left behind” (Simmons & Bourne, 2007, p.19). Shearmur and Polese (2007, p.37) recommend, with reference to peripheral regions, that “development plans should aim at steering peripheral regions towards a soft landing at the new equilibrium point.” At a high level, the planning culture would need to change. The planning system would need to shift from the facilitation of growth, to the management of maintaining the existing built area and or the effects of population loss on the physical and socio-economic environment.

This would require a reorientation of land use planning from low-density, urban fringe development with its attendant infrastructure costs, to a much greater emphasis on urban redevelopment that is fiscally and environmentally sustainable. In addition, we would anticipate the use of a suite of fiscal tools that incentivize the preferred form of urban development (i.e. intensification in its many forms) accompanied by disincentives that would make low density development financially prohibitive (see Blais, 2010). Under-used infrastructure would need to be decommissioned or scaled back.
Finally, we see new and expanded roles for planners working in these mid-sized cities. Several scholars have identified several roles that planners could assume in order to address and manage the prospect of slow growth, no growth, or decline (i.e. planner as facilitator, decline managers, process innovators) (see Schatz, 2010; Hartt, 2016). Earlier work by Gunton (1984) about planners’ roles is also informative (i.e. planner as reformer, bureaucrat, technocrat, etc.). To that end, we suggest additional roles such as objective analyst, lay therapist (i.e. sympathetic ear, empathy), and process facilitator.

This analysis would need to be examined through research. The objective for a future research program would be to generate answers to research questions such as the following:

- How should planners (and planning generally) address the challenges presented by a slow growth/no growth/decline scenario?
- Are current planning practices and processes adequate to meet the challenges presented by slow growth/no growth/decline?
- What would represent an ideal set of practices and processes when planning for slow growth/no growth/decline?
### Table 1. Ontario’s Mid-Sized Cities (50-500,000 population) (2001-2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrie</td>
<td>Barrie</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>141,434</td>
<td>103,710</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belleville</td>
<td>Belleville</td>
<td>Eastern Ontario</td>
<td>50,716</td>
<td>46,029</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brantford</td>
<td>Brantford</td>
<td>SW Ontario</td>
<td>97,496</td>
<td>86,417</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudbury</td>
<td>Greater Sudbury</td>
<td>NEOntario</td>
<td>161,532</td>
<td>155,219</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guelph</td>
<td>Guelph</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>131,794</td>
<td>106,170</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burlington</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>183,314</td>
<td>150,836</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>Eastern Ontario</td>
<td>123,798</td>
<td>114,195</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchener</td>
<td>KWC</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>233,222</td>
<td>190,399</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterloo</td>
<td>KWC</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>104,986</td>
<td>86,543</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge</td>
<td>KWC</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>129,920</td>
<td>110,372</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>SW Ontario</td>
<td>383,822</td>
<td>336,539</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oshawa</td>
<td>Oshawa</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>159,458</td>
<td>139,051</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitby</td>
<td>Oshawa</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>128,377</td>
<td>87,413</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarington</td>
<td>Clarington</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>92,013</td>
<td>69,834</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterborough</td>
<td>Peterborough</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>81,032</td>
<td>71,446</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Catharines</td>
<td>St. Catharines-Niagara</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>133,113</td>
<td>129,710</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niagara Falls</td>
<td>St. Catharines-Niagara</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>88,071</td>
<td>78,815</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welland</td>
<td>St. Catharines-Niagara</td>
<td>GGH-OR</td>
<td>52,293</td>
<td>48,402</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thunder Bay</td>
<td>Thunder Bay</td>
<td>NW Ontario</td>
<td>107,909</td>
<td>109,016</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>DEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakville</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>193,832</td>
<td>144,738</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledon</td>
<td>Caledon</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>66,502</td>
<td>48,184</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halton Hills</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>61,161</td>
<td>39,263</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>MG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgina</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>45,418</td>
<td>31,471</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milton</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>110,128</td>
<td>65,788</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newmarket</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>84,224</td>
<td>40,167</td>
<td>110.6</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>55,455</td>
<td>182,022</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaughan</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>306,233</td>
<td>192,022</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajax</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>119,677</td>
<td>73,753</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markham</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>328,966</td>
<td>208,615</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond Hill</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>195,022</td>
<td>132,030</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>HG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickering</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>91,771</td>
<td>87,199</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kawartha Lakes</td>
<td>Kawartha Lakes</td>
<td>GGH-IR</td>
<td>75,423</td>
<td>69,179</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windsor</td>
<td>Windsor</td>
<td>SW Ontario</td>
<td>217,188</td>
<td>209,218</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarnia</td>
<td>Sarnia</td>
<td>SW Ontario</td>
<td>71,594</td>
<td>70,876</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatham-Kent</td>
<td>Chatham-Kent</td>
<td>NW Ontario</td>
<td>101,647</td>
<td>107,341</td>
<td>-5.5</td>
<td>DEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sault Ste. Marie</td>
<td>Sault Ste. Marie</td>
<td>NW Ontario</td>
<td>73,368</td>
<td>74,566</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>DEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Bay</td>
<td>North Bay</td>
<td>NE Ontario</td>
<td>51,553</td>
<td>52,771</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
<td>DEC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- **GGH** = Greater Golden Horseshoe region
- **GGH-IR** = Inner Ring
- **GGH-OR** = Outer Ring
- **CMA** = Census Metropolitan Area
- **CA** = Census Agglomeration
- **CSD** = Census Subdivision

**Categories:**
- **HG** = High Growth (> 20%)
- **MG** = Moderate Growth (10-20%)
- **SG** = Slow Growth (1-10%)
- **DEC** = Decline (< 0 %)

All categories measured over the 2001–2016 period.

**Sources:**
- Neptis, Implementing the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2013;
- Statistics Canada, Population and dwelling counts, for Canada and census subdivisions (municipalities) with 5,000-plus population, 2006 and 2011 censuses - 100% data, 2010;
- Statistics Canada, 2016 Census.
References


