The Transformation of a Landscape: How the Seaton Process Worked

To look at the planning of Seaton is to investigate the changing aspirations of city planning, design and public policy, in the Toronto region over the last 25 years. The story of the Seaton fiasco reflects this transition in policy, and the ideological antitheses 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 southward, allied with the development of infrastructure and several new-town-style communities. A new urban area 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 350,000) in the area served by the new airport, some 60 km south-east of Toronto. They proposed total of about 3,000 acres for the project.

Public outcry followed cancellation of the airport in 1977, but there was support for some development. The recommended plan called for a 50,000-acre community, the construction of a large agricultural zone and protection of historic resources.

In 1978, the Durham regional government designated urban land use for the area where the new community would be and in 1981 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 Commission deferred its draft plan in 1988, during the first phase of Seaton's history.

In the late 1980s the urbanization of the Toronto region continued at a fast pace. In 1983, the provincial government, concerned about rising housing costs, renewed the quasi-municipal corporation that had been in charge of developing the Seaton lands and rejuvenated the Seaton Town Planning Trust, which would be responsible for updating plans for the land.

There was also a shift in strategy. Seaton was now seen as an opportunity to explore entering approaches 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 municipalities, academic institutions and private consultants. The process culminated in a community workshop, sponsored by the province.

What generally emerged from these discussions was a concern about typical suburbanization of the rural urban fringe - sprawling development, dependence on automobiles, lack of public orientation, segregated land use patterns, the loss of natural areas - and a desire to conserve water and energy and reduce waste.

The workshop culminated in a report, Seaton: A 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 would put the lands to the west side of the holdings area (a long-term agricultural preserve, leaving only the 3,000 acres under urban designation available for future development).
The report also proposed a new round of up to 40,000 redesigns on up to 2,000 acres (not including natural features). The development, the report said, should follow five principles:

1. Sections should demonstrate how compact development can better meet current needs.
2. Sections should reflect the diversity of cultures, ages, and incomes found in the region. It would include many scales of business and industry and promote a variety of land ownership, including cooperatives, corporations, and institutions.
3. Sections should show a mix of building types that encourage living, working, and public spaces. Section centers should be designed to meet the diverse needs of the community and be accessible to everyone.
4. Sections should be an affordable community, with a built-up capacity to evolve over time. The physical, social, and economic structures should be flexible, so the community can built on its heritage.
5. Sections should plan within the limitations imposed by available natural resources, the larger economy and market realities.

The report also proposed a design competition that would test more planning ideas, guide the development of design criteria and fund decisions about what lands should be developed.

Changes in the provincial government required the project until 1993. That October, the province established a public advisory committee to oversee the competition. Together the committee and the Inlet Planning Team retained technical advisors and received a jury of outside experts and community members to evaluate the design proposals.

In December 1993, multi-disciplinary consulting teams were invited to submit concept plans and written statements. The initial direction they were given was based essentially on Section A, a Strategy for Form-based Renewable Planning. In April 1994, three finalist groups were asked to develop their concepts more thoroughly. The competition was completed in November 1994.

For all, the provincial government shifted since 1993, this time to the Conservative Party, which was elected on essentially a platform of rural electronic-based attempts to encourage the provincial deficit. In turn, it had been focused on cutting costs by reducing the role of government, recognizing social programs and promoting privatization.

Enlightened aspects of the planning are environmental and social consideration and public consultation have been neglected or ignored. The Sectional approach to planning is now being downsized and market studies are being conducted to evaluate its roles. Yet, amidst all this planning, Section remains intact.

The year 1993 is also important in that at least the better level of understanding is being realized by principles. New services and on-call, community-based planning approach can gain an important vision into the future. AsVaxtax once said, "A person's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"