An analysis of public debates over urban growth patterns in the City of London, Ontario

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In much of the developed world, the direction and patterns of urban growth have been the subject of public debate. Some scholars and practitioners believe that the current urban development pattern are too outward-oriented and are concerned about its possible negative consequences. Others defend outward expansion, arguing that it fulfils consumer preferences and promotes economic growth. Despite a sizeable literature on the topic, the discussion has been hampered by a lack of knowledge about how growth is perceived by key "agents of change", those individuals whose decisions and activities affect the direction and patterns of urban growth. Additionally, the news media often represents the urban growth debate in simplistic, oppositional terms (e.g. "pro-growth" versus "anti-growth", "pro-business" versus "anti-environment") with little or no regard for local factors that affect development patterns in specific situations. As described in this article, we used a multi-method case study approach to address these limitations and to better understand recent urban growth issues. The primary goal of this study is to assess multiple perceptions of urban growth and management debate in London, Ontario. As elsewhere, the issue of urban growth patterns is intensely debated in this case study. However, we argue that discussion on this topic should change from simplistic generalisations to consideration of locale-specific factors that influence urban growth patterns.

Keywords: urban growth patterns; sprawl; agents of change; London; Ontario

"Stopping or hindering growth is not the answer [to environmental problems] – don't be fooled by those who chant this mantra". [The London Free Press, Saturday, 12 May 2007]

"It's not about whether we believe in growth or not. It's about how we grow". [The London Free Press, Saturday, 9 June 2007]

1. Introduction

In much of the developed world, the direction and patterns of urban growth are among the most vibrantly discussed issues at all levels of planning practice and scholarship (Burchell 1997, Ewing 1997, Gordon and Richardson 1997, Downs 1999, Khan 2001). Some scholars and practitioners believe that the current urban development pattern is too outward-oriented and are concerned about its possible consequences, especially its economic, social, and

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environmental costs (Freilich and Peshoff 1997, Burchell *et al.* 1998, Ciscel 2001, Downs 2005). Critics argue that excessive outward expansion contributes to the loss of prime agricultural lands and environmentally sensitive areas to urban uses, as well as to social inequality and economic inefficiency. They also argue that outward urban expansion results in long commutes, leading to excessive traffic congestion and air pollution (Brueckner 2001), and that peripheral urban growth depresses incentives for redeveloping land closer to city centres, leading to decay of the urban core. Additionally, critics argue that by spreading out residents, it reduces social interactions and weakens the bonds that underpin a healthy society. Consequently, critics have called for policies and regulations to promote compact urban development (e.g. Smart Growth programmes). However, some scholars disagree with these criticisms and argue that outward expansion fulfils consumer preferences (Gordon and Richardson 1997, 2000). Proponents point to various benefits of outward growth, such as more housing and job choices, and they believe that any interference with market mechanisms hinders the efficiency of the economic system.

Despite a sizeable literature on the topic, the discussion has been hampered by a lack of knowledge about how growth is perceived by key "agents of change", those individuals whose decisions and activities affect the direction and patterns of urban growth (e.g. municipal politicians, planners, developers, and interest groups). Furthermore, although the media is a major conduit for information on issues involving urban growth, the literature has not examined whether opinions expressed in newspapers are consistent with the perceptions of key "agents of change". Instead, the news media often portrays the urban growth debate in simplistic, oppositional terms (e.g. "pro-growth" versus "anti-growth" or "pro-business" versus "anti-environment") with little or no regard for local factors that affect development patterns in specific situations.

As described in this article, we used a multi-method case study approach to address these limitations and to better understand recent urban growth issues. The primary goal of this study is to assess multiple perceptions of urban growth and management debate in London, Ontario. In particular, we aim to address three specific objectives:

  (i) to identify trends and themes of newspaper articles related to urban growth patterns and management;
 (ii) to identify the perceptions and concerns of the "agents of change" regarding the direction and patterns of urban growth; and
(iii) to identify policies or local factors that create unique conditions in London.

Analysis and arguments described in this article are based on multiple methods, including a content analysis of the city's only newspaper and in-depth interviews with municipal politicians, public officials (i.e. planners), developers, industry groups, and community groups involved in land development process in London. We analysed the local newspaper to understand public opinion because its role in shaping and reflecting public opinion on social and environmental issues is well documented (Page *et al.* 1987, Fan 1988, 1997, McCallum *et al.* 1991, Fan and Cook 2003, McCombs 2004). Also, studies have found that the news media strongly influences agenda-setting for public policy issues (McCombs 2004).

2.   A brief overview of research context

London, Ontario, is located approximately halfway between Detroit, Michigan, and Toronto, Ontario, in the County of Middlesex (Figure 1). Incorporated in 1855 at the forks of the

Figure 1.   Map showing location of London, Ontario.

Thames River, London is Canada's 10th largest city and the 4th largest city in Ontario, with a Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) population of 457,720 (Statistics Canada 2006).

London's political boundaries result from 17 municipal annexations since 1826. Expanding from the forks of the Thames River, the City of London acquired the adjacent townships of London East, London South, and London West in 1898. In 1961, the city expanded in all directions, increasing its land mass from 8019 acres to 42,550 acres (City of London 2007). London approximately tripled its land mass in 1993 by expanding 63,595 acres (25,736 km^2), from 40,330 acres (163 km^2) to 103,925 acres (420.57 km^2) (Statistics Canada 2006). As a result, the city has a huge quantity of undeveloped land, which affects land supply for housing. A 2006 land needs assessment study estimated that the city has 38 years of low-density land supply, 60 years of medium-density land supply, and 90 years of high-density land supply (City of London 2007).

London is a single-tier, ward-based municipal government with 19 voting members on the city council. The council comprises 14 councillors, each representing an individual ward, 4 members of the Board of Control, who are elected on a city-wide basis, and the

mayor. Each member of the council must sit on one of the council's three standing committees, which include the Planning Committee, Environment and Transportation Committee, and Community and Protective Services.

Generally, residential development in the City of London has moved outward first, followed by commercial development. This pattern has been interrupted by recent developments such as Hyde Park, located in the northwest corner of the city where commercial development is permitted to leapfrog, requiring the residential growth to then catch up. The development of the city has occurred in a fairly sequential order – that is, green field development has been reasonably regulated and thereby minimising leapfrogging. These patterns have been determined by the availability of infrastructure or the economics of installing new trunk sewers, among others.

The bulk of recent urban development processes in the city has been concentrated in the northwest and west sides of the city (Figure 2). There has been some development in the south and eastern parts of the city, but this has largely been constrained by the boundary
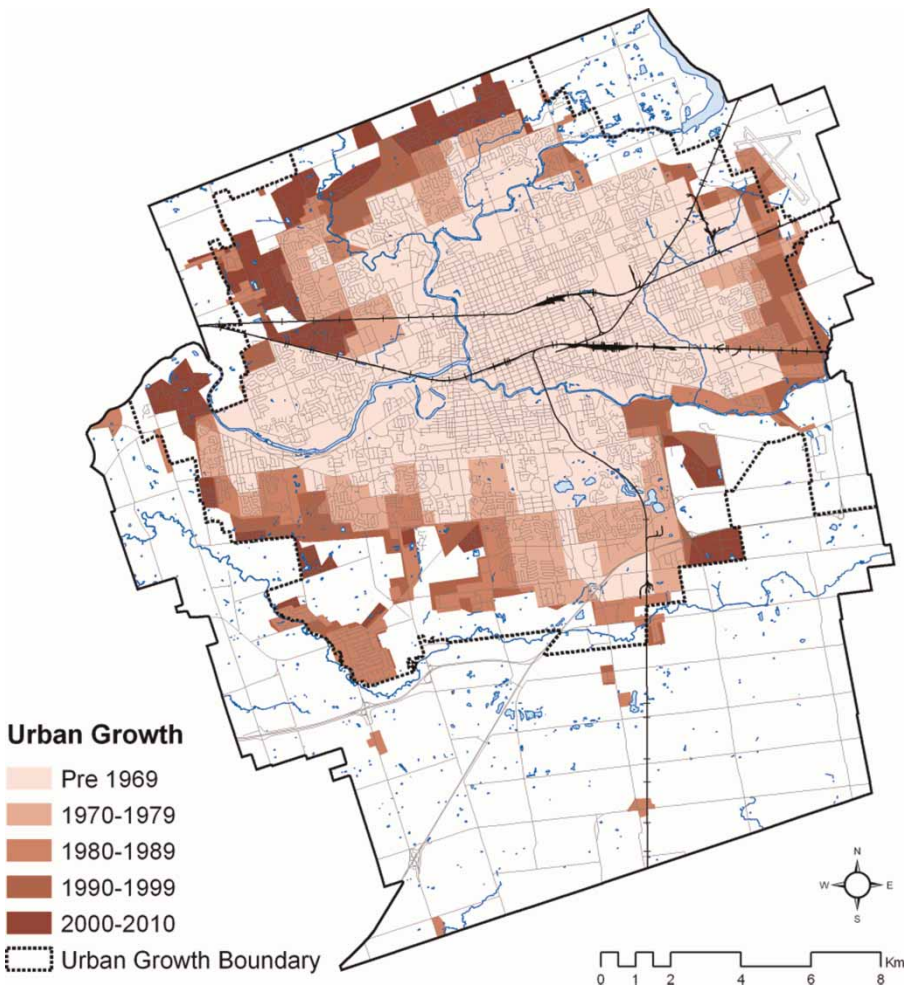

Figure 2.   City of London's urban built-up areas over the years.
Source: Jason Gilliland, after data provided by Chris Howell, Planning & Development Division, City of London.

of the Highway 401 and the industry/airport, respectively. There is significant pent-up demand for new development in the southwest corner of the city. However, outward growth has been constrained by a lack of available storm water servicing. With the completion of a new SWM plant in 2013, new development will be allowed to proceed.

3.   Data sources and method

This study is different from the conventional hypothetical and quantitative studies of urban growth (e.g. Song and Knaap 2004), in that we assessed how key decision-makers perceive the urban growth patterns and directions in the City of London, Ontario. Through the use of content-analysis techniques, we identified key themes and public concerns about the direction and patterns of urban growth. To accomplish this task, we drew on three major data sources: (a) in-depth interviews with key "agents of change", (b) policy documents, and (c) articles from the *London Free Press* (*LFP*), the city's only newspaper, from the 10-year period of 1998–2008. This study period was chosen because it provides sufficient data regarding the influence of multiple variables (e.g. economic cycles and local election results) on development patterns and how the media represents the development patterns. Furthermore, this time period begins with the first publication of the *LFP* online.

For the content analysis, public opinion is expressed in the combination of news articles and opinion/editorial pieces. It is the responsibility of journalists to write news articles that reflect a diversity of public opinions without sharing a bias towards any specific viewpoint. Opinion pieces are a place for the public to express their views (and share their personal bias). Through the interviews, public opinion is expressed in the representative responsibilities of the interviewees. For example, while politicians represent the needs and demands of their electorate, the city urban planning staffs work to implement the plans of the politicians and to develop policies based on the "public interest" (i.e. needs of the public). Similarly, developers, trade groups, and various organisations selected for the study represent the interests of various groups which are both public and private.

Using a comprehensive list of search terms derived from the previous literature (e.g. Bengston *et al.* 2005), we conducted a formal search of the *LFP* during summer and fall of 2008. One objective of the article analysis was to determine whether local stakeholders perceive London to exhibit a growth pattern that is characteristic of urban sprawl. As such, "urban growth" and "urban sprawl" were primary search terms; secondary search terms included "sustainable", "pro-growth", "anti-growth", and "environment". The terms "urban growth" and "urban sprawl" were the most dominant news headline terms over the study period.

Using the LexisNexis Academic database, we initially retrieved 251 articles. Articles that did not meet predetermined inclusion criteria were considered irrelevant and were omitted from the study. For example, we omitted articles about urban growth issues outside of London. A total of 82 articles were omitted based on inclusion criteria, and 10 duplicates were deleted, resulting in 159 articles for analysis. These articles were catalogued according to type (i.e. news, editorial, and letters). They were also organised by month and year, which enabled us to analyse the changing importance of particular issues over time. Overall, the frequency of relevant articles, the number of words per article, and the number of articles per newspaper section provided a sufficient base to map key themes and to determine the trajectory of the urban growth debate in London over the study period. Although this content analysis helped describe media coverage of urban growth patterns, it did not provide information necessary to assess whether views expressed in the news media were consistent with the perceptions of the "agents of change", nor could the news media reveal the complexities of the urban development process.

To address this shortcoming and supplement the content analysis, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews. Interviewees were city council members ($n = 10$), city planning staff members ($n = 5$), developers and representatives of industry groups ($n = 8$), a representative of a neighbourhood citizen group ($n = 1$), and the journalist responsible for the majority of the articles contained in the media database ($n = 1$). The interviewees were purposively selected (Strauss and Cobin 1990) to represent maximum variation among the key "agents" who influence urban growth patterns in the city.

The primary goal of our selection process was to get a balanced representation of the diversity of opinions and interests. We identified the groups that would best represent the diversity of opinions. All of the interviewees have made significant contributions to the debate in London, so choosing some specific individuals was fairly straightforward. Others were recommended by interviewees and we decided whether: (a) they would contribute novel ideas to the responses already obtained and (b) by including them we were providing a better representation of the diversity of opinions (i.e. proportionate representation of the identified groups).

The interviews occurred from May 2008 through July 2009. Each lasted between 45 and 90 min. Interview questions, both semi-structured and open-ended, explored interviewees' opinions of urban growth management and were guided by a checklist of key discussion themes. We had identified the checklist themes during the content analysis and reviewed and revised them several times. The themes included urban growth patterns ("urban sprawl"), politics and urban growth, infrastructure financing, and policies and practices. The checklist of themes allowed for flexibility during the interviews, enabling the interviewers to add questions, and varied slightly among interview groups. Specific questions included the following: "How do you define urban sprawl?", "Is the current growth pattern a concern in your constituency?", "What are the misconceptions (if any) about the development industry's position on growth?", and "Do you think peripheral growth is affecting London's downtown core?". The interviews were audio-recorded with respondents' permission and transcribed verbatim.

Themes and constructs related to the key research objectives guided the analysis of interview data. The key response categories were created prior to line-by-line coding, which is generally considered most appropriate for qualitative data analysis (Strauss and Cobin 1990). This is an interactive and inductive process that allows the data to direct theme development.

We analysed the transcriptions carefully to identify recurrent themes, concerns, and key phrases, primarily identifying themes by terms similar to those used in the content analysis. From these readings, we were able to determine five fundamental issues relevant to the urban growth debate in London: (i) the changing political orientation of the city council; (ii) the definition of "urban sprawl"; (iii) public policy determinants of urban growth; (iv) public perceptions of urban growth; and (v) controversial sites of urban development. All interviewees mentioned each of these topics in some manner.

During the coding process, we reviewed key categories several times to ensure that concepts pertaining to the same phenomena were placed in the same category. Additionally, we took steps to ensure consistent data analysis (Patton 1987, Krefting 1991), including use of a comprehensive topic list. We implemented a code–recode procedure, with several weeks separating each coding process. Furthermore, to reduce researcher bias, two members of the investigating team reviewed the transcripts independently before analysing the transcripts together, comparing notes on recurring themes, and discussing discrepancies within various categories.

4. Results

The remaining sections of the paper detail the results of both the newspaper content analysis and the in-depth interviews about issues relating to urban growth patterns in the city. The main study objectives and the emerging themes provided the structure for organising the findings. Direct quotations from the newspaper articles and interview transcripts illustrate the themes and contextualise participants' responses. Quotations from interviewees are representative of the interviewees' responses as a whole, and they provide a vivid understanding of the themes (Seale and Silverman 1997). Due to the relatively small sample size and to ensure confidentiality, we do not provide the names of quoted interviewees.

4.1   *Trends and content of LFP coverage*

The public debate on urban growth and management in London intensified during the study period (1998–2008). The 159 LFP articles published during this period illustrate the growing interest in and concerns about urban growth patterns in the city. In particular, the number of articles about these topics increased significantly during 2003–2006 (Figure 3). Coverage particularly increased around key municipal election periods. For example, the *LFP* published 18 articles in 2003, a significant increase over the 5 articles published in 2002. Similarly, the *LFP* published 23 articles in 2006, but a relatively smaller number in 2005 ($n = 14$). The larger number of articles in 2003 and 2006 corresponds to municipal elections in those years – events that produced tremendous public interest in urban growth patterns.

For example, during the 2006 municipal elections, three of the five newly elected councillors premised their election campaigns on curtailing urban sprawl and protecting the environment (*LFP*, 13 November 2006, pp. 63, 61). After that election, the *LFP* reported that "Five newcomers won seats on London city council last night shifting the balance of power from the right to the left and perhaps ending a period when developments mushroomed despite concerns about urban sprawl" (*LFP*, 13 November 2006, p. 63). Media coverage of urban growth issues also increased when controversial issues arose, as most notably demonstrated during the 2007 debates about expanding the city's urban growth
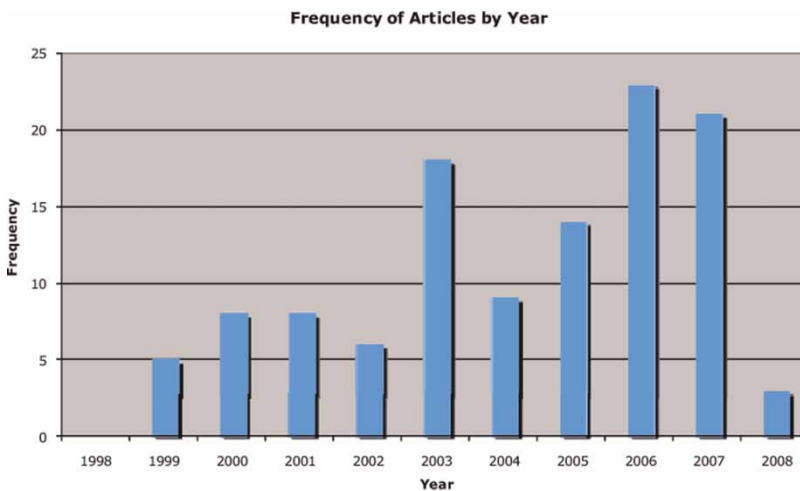

Figure 3.   LFP coverage of urban growth patterns.

boundary (UGB) and a proposed $80M industrial park that would allow the city to swap land in and out of the UGB.

Local public discussion of urban growth patterns in the city reveals two major approaches – whether growth should be managed or market-driven. This division is typically described as "pro-growth" and "anti-growth", with most newspaper articles dominated by the latter group (about 86%) (see also Gillham 2002). The so-called anti-growth articles typically express concerns about the social, economic, and environmental costs of the city's growth patterns, including loss of open space, loss of agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands, higher costs for providing public infrastructure, and deterioration of the city's downtown (Table 1). As one such article expressed these concerns:

> However, you describe it urban sprawl is a troubling problem. It robs our society of the capacity to produce food by gobbling prime farm land. It destroys the woodland, wetlands and natural areas that are home to wildlife and help protect water quality. And it creates unwieldy communities in which municipal services are difficult and expensive to provide. (*LFP*, 24 February 2003)

In contrast, the so-called pro-growth articles not only found no fault with the city's growth patterns but also see tremendous benefits such as new employment opportunities and more housing choices. As one newspaper article vividly captured this position, "…to slow or hinder growth raises the cost of housing…it is a simple equation: building homes generates employment. Not building homes means our industry won't provide those jobs and our workforce will be forced to move to seek jobs elsewhere" (*LFP*, 12 May 2007). The following quotations illustrate the sharp division between these approaches.

> London's urban sprawl is an appalling example of development run wild… (*LFP*, 5 February 2005, p. A6)

> Urban sprawl in London is no urban myth. With no physical barriers to expansion such as lakes or nearby cities, London has grown to become a city with the same land area as Paris, France. (*LFP*, 8 August 2007, p. a7)

Table 1.   Major urban growth sentiments in LFP, 1998–2008.

Key "anti-growth" sentiments
Conversion of farmland to urban use
Loss of biodiversity
Loss of wildlife habitat
Decreased air quality and water quality
Forest fragmentation
Traffic congestion and air pollution
Decline of downtown core
Cost of expansion of facilities
Lack of community
Poor aesthetic
Key "pro-growth" sentiments
Increase in employment activities
Expansion of city's tax base
More housing choices
Growth pays for growth

Stopping or hindering [urban] growth is not the answer – don't be fooled by those who preach this mantra. (*LFP*, May 12 2007)

[The development industry] is truly doing many great things to contribute to clean, green and prosperous cities across the country. (*LFP*, 7 July 2007, p. H2)

Consistent with the prevalence of environmental attitudes at the global level, *LFP* articles dealing with environmental issues are the most dominant (51%), followed by costs requirement issues (18%) and community and neighbourhood-related matters, such as homogeneity, loss of community, and the decline of the downtown core (14%). Other than times when controversial issues were being discussed, themes covered by the *LFP* did not differ substantively.

4.2 Interviews responses

The second and third major objectives of this research were to identify how "agents of change" perceive the direction and patterns of urban growth and to identify specific local factors affecting the debate. Five recurrent themes emerged from the interviews, namely (i) an inconsistent definition of "urban sprawl"; (ii) the changing political orientation of city council; (iii) policy determinants of urban growth patterns; (iv) public perceptions of urban growth patterns, as projected by the media; and (v) the role of controversial sites of urban development. Each theme represents interviewees' concerns that illustrate, in part, the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between the general public's perceptions of development and the changing realities of urban growth (i.e. the bureaucratic-political process by which urban development occurs). The five identified interview themes are discussed below in terms of how they affect urban development and growth policies in London.

4.2.1 Definition of "urban sprawl"

Local public discussion and *LFP* articles seem to characterise the city's current growth pattern and direction as "urban sprawl". When the key "agents of change" were asked whether they perceive urban development in the city as urban sprawl, they provided inconsistent definitions of the term, as well as inconsistent responses as to whether the city exhibits features characteristic of urban sprawl. The inconsistency is evident among various stakeholder groups and throughout the city council. One group of interviewees believed that London has all the features of urban sprawl and described the phenomenon variously as "peripheral growth that is auto-dependent", "development in all directions", "low density development", "increasing homogeneity", "unplanned growth", "leapfrog development", and "development that causes the city to grow out like onion – as opposed to a center". One respondent described sprawl as follows: "building whatever is cheap, and building outward because of the availability of cheap land. There is no consideration for alternative transportation, it is centered on a car". As will be expected, the descriptions above were expressed by respondents whose concerns of the current growth patterns are based on economic, social, and environmental sentiments.

In contrast to the above descriptions, another group of interviewees rejected the notion that development in London is characteristic of urban sprawl, arguing instead that the city hardly exhibits sprawl-like features or "development run wild". For example, one interviewee, a long-time planner, characterised urban sprawl as, "unplanned, uncontrolled, and uncoordinated development". This interviewee noted that new projects require planning

approval and that major public projects (e.g. trunk sewers and community centres) typically go through a budgetary and planning approval process. With such processes in place, that interviewee believed describing growth and development as urban sprawl would be difficult. Similarly, other interviewees in that group defined urban sprawl as "development outside the urban growth boundary" and described any development within the UGB as "progress" or "positive development". That particular group generally believed that the public had a wrong view of urban sprawl because, as one interviewee stated, "for them anytime they see a new subdivision built on what used to be a farm field is sprawl". Some interviewees in this group lamented the negative perception of developers in the city. As one interviewee stated, "When the name developer is put forward, everybody automatically thinks of somebody with two horns in their head. It's the devil coming. And whatever we have to do to stop the devil from coming forward, we have to do. And I think that's wrong". Some of the interviewees in this group called for a change in attitude and perception, which they believed hindered progress in the city. As one commented, "it gives the impression that the city is not open to business". Overall, not only is there disagreement among the respondents on the definition of sprawl, there is also disagreement on whether or not the city exhibits the kind of development pattern that is often associated with sprawl in some US metropolitan regions.

4.2.2 *Changing political orientation of the city council*

All interviewees noted that the changing political orientation of the city council significantly affected growth policies and patterns, referring to a gradual shift from the political right to the left in council members' votes over the 2003 and 2006 municipal elections. Specifically, the results of the 2006 election led to what the *LFP* and several interviewees called a shift in the balance of power on the council. The interviewees generally noted that prior to the 2006 municipal election, voting patterns on city council could be easily predicted by a clear majority, such as a 13–6 vote. After the 2006 municipal election, however, many of the votes on the city council – specifically those concerned with planning and development issues – became subject to an unpredictable split, such as 10–9. Consequentially, the council's approval process was less predictable because decisions were often determined by swing votes.

One interviewee indicated that council decisions have become defined by "positional" politics, rather than by "political" politics, meaning planning ideology plays a significant role in the decision-making process so that decisions are premised on both philosophical leanings and the facts of development. Although some interviewees characterised the council's recent approach to planning as a "balanced approach" to growth issues in the city, other council members argued that this approach creates an "unnecessary roadblock" for developers. In their view, greater restrictions on developers directly lead to the loss of economic growth opportunities, development projects, and employment.

This political shift is clearly indicated by the Planning Committee's membership following the 2006 election. Four of the six members ran on "campaigns of responsible growth, rather than unlimited growth". These four members were able to control the development applications process and impose new demands on developers before project approval. For example, the 2006 Planning Committee members decided to develop a set of urban design guidelines, establish an Urban Design Review Panel, and hire an urban designer in the city's planning division. Other major decisions included developing a Growth Management Strategy for London and making major revisions to the Urban Works Reserve Fund (UWRF), a financial mechanism unique to London that developers

use to fund major infrastructure projects. These decisions gave the council greater control over where and when development can occur in the city and how it is financed.

Local development companies and industry organisations have led the opposition to planning decisions that they perceived as influenced by the council's changing political orientation. Collectively, they have established a lobbyist group called Keep London Growing Coalition (KLGC). Formed through a partnership between the London Home Builders Association, the London Development Institute, and other industry groups, the KLGC's purpose is to represent the development industry to the Planning Committee and to keep the interests of development on the agenda at city hall. The KLGC has participated in city-led discussions and policy development related to a growth management strategy and revisions to the policy mechanisms used to finance major infrastructure projects.

Developer control over the council is a controversial issue that solicited mixed responses from interviewees. One incumbent council member argued that the political shift has resulted in some developers "losing some of their grip on council". However, another council member interviewee argued that "London has always had this vision that developers run city hall. I can tell you that it does not happen. It is untrue". Of the 10 council members interviewed, five argued that developers have historically exerted significant influence over planning decisions and four claimed that developers have not. The remaining interviewee, known to function as a swing vote, simply stated that although developers do not necessarily have influence over planning decisions, they do have "access" and an ability to navigate the system. This difference in responses indicates the degree to which council members are polarised on this issue.

4.2.3   *Local factors influencing public debate on urban growth patterns*

Three significant pieces of public policy have played an elemental role in directing the course of recent urban growth debates in the city. These include (a) the municipal annexations of 1993, (b) the creation of an UGB, and (c) the restructuring of the UWRF.

(a) *1993 annexation*. In the early 1990s, the city had no developable industrial lands and a dwindling supply of land for commercial and residential uses. To resolve this problem, the Province of Ontario, led by Municipal Affairs Minister David Cooke, appointed London businessperson John Brant to gather information about and hold public hearings on the feasibility of annexing the surrounding townships. Based on the *Brant Report*, the province announced a massive annexation beyond what the city sought. The annexation nearly tripled the geographical size of the city, taking over towns such as Westminster to the south. It increased the population by only 8000 residents, but it provided enough developable land to last 90 years. The availability of developable land led to "Vision '96", a city-led planning exercise that sought public input on where and how London should grow in the future. One of the only tangible results of the Vision '96 exercise was the creation of the UGB, which contains enough developable land to satisfy development needs for another 30 years. Thirteen interviewees believed that the annexation provided bountiful and relatively cheap land and, despite the creation of the UGB, resulted in a growth pattern that some interviewees described as "appalling", "unsmart", and "unmanaged". However, other respondents disagreed with this conclusion, arguing that the city's urban development processes have been regulated.

(b) *UGB*. As a direct consequence of the 1993 annexation and the Vision '96 planning exercise, city policy-makers created an UGB around the current physical limits. The purpose of the UGB was to provide sufficient developable land while protecting against urban sprawl. The rigidity of the UGB led to recent public debates on the city's role in directing urban growth patterns. Some council members were concerned about the rigidity of the UGB and suggested that the boundary should be altered as needed to respond to specific development needs. Proponents of this viewpoint argued that such alterations will make available for development land that is easier and less costly to develop. As one veteran council member argued, the UBG is "like a deck of cards; you can move them around but you'll always still have 52 cards". Those who hold this position believe that "development within the UGB is not sprawl, its progress". At the time of this study, the Planning Committee was intensely debating an application for an $80 million industrial park development project that would be located adjacent to, but outside of, the UGB. Those who support the land swap argue that servicing is already available along the road where the site is located, so expanding the UGB to allow the project will not result in additional infrastructure costs. Opponents of the land swap, however, argued against it, believing it will set a dangerous precedent.

(c) *UWRF*. Two municipal funds exist in London to finance hard and soft infrastructure: the UWRF and the Capital Services Reserve Fund (CSRF). The UWRF is a rolling fund that receives revenue from development charges and provides developers with financing for project-specific hard infrastructure projects, such as sewers, roads, and stormwater management systems. The UWRF is a financial mechanism unique to London – nothing of its kind exists elsewhere in North America. The CSRF also receives revenue from development charges, but, unlike the UWRF, it is managed and controlled by the council. The CSRF provides funding for such projects as major trunk sewers, community centres, and libraries. In the past, development charges were allocated 30/70 to the UWRF and the CSRF, respectively. The revisions to the funding mechanism changed the allocation to 10/90, thus increasing the number of infrastructure items controlled by the council and reducing the types of projects that can be funded by developers through the UWRF.

The UWRF has enjoyed tremendous support from developers, but it has come under close scrutiny. Its proponents believe that such a fund allows developers to advance funding for infrastructure services where "it is normally uneconomical for the City". Although the interviewees did not all agree that the UWRF should continue, all interviewees supported the changes to reduce the city's liability towards developers and to increase the council's control over allocating funds to specific infrastructure projects through the CSRF.

Collectively, the 1993 annexation, the creation of the UGB, and the revisions to the UWRF and CSRF not only shape the debate, but also significantly altered the planning and development environment in the city. To ensure that the future outward growth of the city is organised, economical, and environmentally sensitive, city policy-makers implemented policy tools (e.g. the UGB and revisions to the UWRF/CSRF) that provide council and staff members with the leverage to balance the needs of the public good with the needs of the real estate market.

4.2.4 *Public perceptions of urban growth patterns*

The interviewees shared differing views on the depth, scope, and legitimacy of the public's perceptions of urban growth patterns in London. While all of the interviewees agreed that council and city staff members were divided on the extent and patterns of urban growth in the city, there was less agreement about whether these issues were a major concern of Londoners. Five of the 10 councillors said that their constituents were significantly concerned about urban growth patterns and that they had focused their campaign platforms on improving those patterns. The remaining members of the council argued that their constituents were not concerned about urban growth patterns but were, instead, more concerned about issues such as job creation and economic growth at the time of an oncoming economic recession.

The five councillors who believed their constituents were concerned about current growth patterns developed their opinions largely based on discussions with constituents during canvassing, leading four of the five to build their election campaign platforms around the issue. They also noted the popularity of and support for "The Killer B's", a moniker created by another member of the council to describe the four women who controlled the Planning Committee at the time and who had fought for significant changes to municipal planning policies. Specifically, these interviewees claimed that environmental implications of greenfield development (e.g. loss of farmland, woodlots, and the infringement of development on ESAs) were at the root of their constituents' concerns, as well as the belief that developers held significant influence over the city and members of the council.

Conversely, the councillors who did not believe Londoners are concerned about current urban growth patterns largely disregarded the growing number of *LFP* articles relating to urban growth and the council's division on the topic, stating that the articles demonstrate the newspaper's inability to report news accurately. For example, regarding the media's role in educating the public on urban growth debates at city hall, one veteran council member stated plainly, "[W]e have one really bad newspaper. It does not report news, it generates news". This opinion does not imply that urban growth issues were not a significant issue on the council's agenda or not important to Londoners. Rather, in their opinion, the newspaper exploited the divisions on the council and exaggerated their severity, particularly those articles spurred by the use of the name "Killer B's". These councillors maintained that the increase in the number of *LFP* articles relating to urban growth debates in the council were not correlated to an increase in public interest but were the product of journalistic story-making, significantly exacerbating the already tense divide between council members. Another veteran politician corroborated this view by noting that "There is no doubt that Council is split on this issue [of urban sprawl], but that the creation of 'pro-growth' and 'anti-growth' factions is a simplistic, *Free Press*, made-up thing".

City staff members and stakeholder representatives noted that the root causes of any negative public perceptions of urban growth were poor public education and low engagement in the planning and development process. For example, if members of the general public do not understand the development application and approval process, their perception of new build projects will be limited to the physical form of new construction. As one senior planning staff member noted, "Some people think sprawl is anytime you see a new subdivision built on what use to be a farm field". As such, NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard-ism) significantly affects whether the public perceives new construction as a case of urban sprawl. For example, a homeowner in a new subdivision may consider adjacent residential subdivision or commercial development projects as sprawl. In other words,

people may support more compact development and intensification but not in their own neighbourhoods.

The city's planning staff members interviewed believed that the problem lies in the fact that the public is not well educated about the development process and the various roles of stakeholders, including the developers, builders, and the City itself. A prominent staff member noted that better public engagement in the process and better education on the planning and development process should be a priority for the city. Another staff member reiterated this point, noting that the public does not have a clear understanding of the city's and the developers' roles.

4.2.5   *Controversial site of urban development – Hyde Park project*

Throughout the interviews, interviewees identified a number of non-contiguous greenfield development sites. These sites reflect "leapfrog" development, as opposed to progressive and contiguous outward growth. One such site is Hyde Park, a recent suburban development project in the northwest corner of the city. This project provoked much debate on the council and in the local news media regarding the city's urban growth patterns. Much of the debate centred on the costs of urban growth (i.e. that growth does not pay for growth), specifically costs related to the funding mechanisms (e.g. UWRF) available to developers for financing major infrastructure projects. With construction beginning in the early 2000s, some interviewees argued that the Hyde Park development represents leap-frog growth development, primarily because the construction of this commercial retail project preceded the expansion of residential subdivisions, requiring new home builds to "catch up". The Hyde Park development required several major infrastructure expansion projects, including widening the adjacent arterial road from two lanes to four and extending trunk sewers, sidewalks, and street lighting. Municipal council members, city planning staff members, and stakeholder group interviewees all noted that the Hyde Park development was approved prematurely. One council member referred to the Hyde Park development as the "straw that broke the camel's back", sparking the current public debate over development patterns in London. In this manner, the council member reflected the fact that the project timing did not coincide with the city's allocation of funds in the UWRF and the CSRF needed to finance the major infrastructure works, including those required by the Hyde Park project.

Since residential development at Hyde Park follows commercial development, the city has little prospect of recuperating the infrastructure investment costs through increased residential assessments in the medium term. As such, the city will have difficulty financing the required infrastructure without neglecting growth in other parts of the city. Despite these issues, several interviewees noted that Hyde Park is a viable commercial centre. As noted by a municipal councillor, "People talk about the commercial development in Hyde Park . . . and people say it's stupid that we've put it out there and it's so bad for the environment. What do we see over there? It's packed with people and cars".

5.   Conclusion and implications

As mentioned previously, urban growth patterns in London, Ontario, have been the subject of widespread public debate over the past decade. This debate is captured in the local news media and the municipal political landscape. The economic, political, and policy influences affecting the urban growth debate in London are unique to the city. A key objective of this study was to uncover the breadth and depth of such local factors because, to date, discussion

on the topic has been presented in simplistic, oppositional terms (e.g. "pro-growth" versus "anti-growth" or "pro-business" versus "anti-environment") with little or no regard for specific local factors spurring the debate. This paper is an attempt to show what trends and themes shape the debate about urban growth in London and to discuss how this debate is perceived by "agents of change". As evident from analysing newspaper articles, urban growth patterns are the subject of an increasingly widespread debate in London. Discussions about growth patterns have intensified during local municipal elections, and, in some municipal wards, opinions about growth determined the outcomes of elections. Candidates' beliefs and discussion about urban growth patterns will likely influence the outcome of future elections. Media coverage of the topic often increased when controversial issues arose. The increase in coverage was most obvious during the 2007 debate on whether to expand the city's UGB and the proposed $80M industrial park that would allow the city to swap land in and out of the UGB. This increased coverage around key controversial issues supports Gillham's (2002, p. xiv) suggestion of a "gathering storm" of concern about the effect of urban sprawl.

The media has expressed similar concerns about the effects of urban growth patterns as those often expressed elsewhere. These concerns include the loss of farmland, urban decline, traffic problems, environmental pollution, and infrastructure costs. Those who reject such concerns have often pointed to the benefits of increased development activities, such as increased employment activities, expanded city tax base, and increased housing choices.

The local media plays a significant role in raising and directing public perceptions of "urban sprawl". However, the media has typically presented the issue in simplistic, oppositional terms (e.g. "pro-growth" versus "anti-growth" or "pro-business" versus "anti-environment"). Findings from our interviews with key "agents of change" suggest that such oppositional terms do not accurately reflect their positions on this issue. One interviewee noted that "this marginalizes and categorizes people and it really limits the debate". In particular, those interviewees who have been labelled "anti-growth" expressed strong reservation about such categorisations, with one interviewee arguing that "every councilor is pro-growth". One councillor explained that the difference is that "[they] have different opinions on the type of growth, and how big [a city] can get". Another interviewee observed that such categorisations not only are unhelpful but also do not accurately reflect the positions of people involved in the debate, stating "I think the danger to it is to paint those labels on it, well they're misnomers right off the bat. Some would label a good chunk of councilors as anti-growth. Growth will occur. To have zero growth or contraction is counter-intuitive". Another interviewee agreed, noting, "There are some types of growth that are desirable and other growth that is not desirable". Nearly all interviewees made comments along the same lines.

The public debate on the topic will benefit from an examination of locale-specific factors influencing urban growth patterns. In the present study, specific policies and factors are key determinants of growth patterns, producing public interest throughout the city, including a series of annexations, the UWRF, and the dynamics of the city's UGBs. In other words, although public concerns are similar everywhere, such as the environmental impact, traffic congestion, deterioration of the downtown core, and infrastructure costs, exploring the "geography" of urban growth patterns debate will help "agents of change" understand the local factors that give rise to the debate. By becoming aware of these factors, those involved in the debate can refocus it away from its traditional polarities (i.e. "pro-business" versus "pro-environment").

Finally, we hope that by understanding the key concerns in the urban growth debate, policy-makers and planners will have the information necessary to guide the design and

implementation of urban growth policies and to educate the public on the processes that shape urban development. The debate on some issues will likely continue, issues such as infrastructure financing, urban decline, loss of farm land employment creation, and tax base expansion. By becoming aware of the relative importance of these concerns, local policy-makers, indeed, all "agents of change" involved in decision-making, will be able not only to develop more acceptable urban management strategies but also to adopt more collaborative positions in the debate.

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