



Cities and climate governance: From experimental initiatives to reshaping urban development

**By Dr. Matthew Paterson¹
University of Ottawa**

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Abstract

Cities have become an increasingly important site of climate governance for a number of reasons. Our knowledge of how cities have responded across the world has focused on the one hand on the emergence of important transnational city networks like C40, and on the other hand via the focus on experimental initiatives. This paper addresses the need to complement these focus with a rethinking of urban development per se. It illustrates the point by exploring some aspects of climate governance and politics in the city of Ottawa, particularly what the politics of urban intensification in Ottawa reveals about climate change politics.

There is now a substantial amount of research about climate change and cities. Much of this focuses on two specific areas of research. One is the dynamics of transnational city networks (Betsill and Bulkeley 2004; Bulkeley et al. 2012; Bulkeley and Betsill 2003; Gordon 2013; Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Lee 2012; Román 2010) and the other is on the experimental character of governance within and across cities (Hoffmann 2010; Bulkeley and Castán Broto 2013; Bulkeley et al. 2015). My argument in this short piece is that

¹ Dr. Matthew Paterson (Matthew.Paterson@uottawa.ca) is a professor of political science at the University of Ottawa. His research focuses on the political economy of global environmental change.

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alongside focus on innovations, experiments, low carbon projects, and networked governance, we need to think about climate policy and politics in cities in relation to the core aspects of urban development and thus urban political economy.

Focusing on this aspect of urban climate politics will draw our attention to the continuing contradictions between the attempts to engender low-carbon transitions in cities and prevailing norms in urban development. That is, at the same time as various actors and institutions are developing various plans, projects and experiments, they are either at the same time doing other things that go in the opposite direction, or their experiments may be being undermined by normalized high-carbon decision making that reproduces the status quo. As a consequence, the political dynamics that make such normality difficult to shift ought also to attain significant attention, since such entrenched regimes need also to be shifted.

I illustrate this argument in relation to urban planning processes in North America, in particular with attempts to increase urban density, focused on Ontario and Ottawa in particular. Urban planning processes are an important site where these contradictions are evident. While it is the case that many cities across the continent have developed all sorts of innovations in climate policy, they nevertheless have struggled for the most part to shift the entrenched urban development dynamic centred on road and housing construction, combined with contestations over urban sprawl and over particular projects.

We know in general that increasing urban density is crucial to understanding the overall GHG performance of a city. Low-density cities have structurally higher emissions than lower ones, due primarily to increased automobile dependence, and secondarily to increased home size and thus heating/cooling bills. As an illustration, European cities tend to have below half the GHG emissions per capita than North American cities as a consequence of the former's higher-density cities. In the Ontario context (and most of Canada also, although the U.S. is rather different on this score, with still considerable amounts of coal-fired electricity) electricity is highly decarbonised through a mix of hydroelectricity (22%) and nuclear (57%), having entirely eliminated coal-fired generation in 2014 (a little coal electricity is still imported, but coal is down from 19% of electricity in around 2008 to effectively zero today) and with rapid growth in wind and solar, largely stimulated by the feed-in-tariff introduced in 2009. This means that transport emissions and direct energy use in buildings (natural gas, mostly, with some propane in rural areas) are extremely important in Ontario's GHG emissions, 34% and 17% respectively (figure 1 below). So central to decarbonisation is the transformation of the transport sector. And central to understanding this is therefore returning to questions of the drivers of automobile dependence – the patterns of urban development.

Most North American cities have now in place, going back to the 1990s, policies ostensibly aimed at increasing urban density. This is now often articulated in relation to climate change, but was driven from the 1990s by a combination of fears about the decline of urban cores, the fiscal costs of low-density sprawl, the social contestation over city form, and urban air quality concerns. So the push for increased urban density arises in effect out of an internal contradiction within the political economy of urban development.

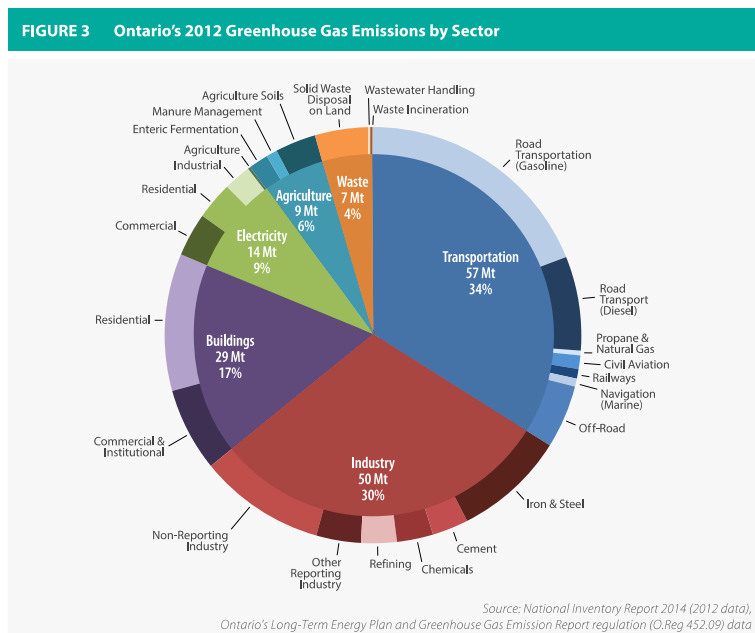


Figure 1. Ontario's 2012 Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Sector. Source: Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change. 2015. *Ontario's Climate Change: Discussion Paper 2015*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

The pursuit of increased urban density has been pursued in many North American municipalities through the notion of 'intensification' as a planning tool. While sounding like increasing urban density, it usually refers in bureaucratic language simply to the percentage of residential units that must be built inside the existing built-up area. Municipal councils in Ontario are for example required to set targets in their strategic planning documents. At the same time, however, they are currently also required to have enough land outside that boundary zoned for residential development equivalent to their projected demand for residential housing over the next 17 years. So the pursuit of intensification is structured within the existing urban political economy of development – a particular set of relations between the City Council, property developers, and community groups, as relations among Councillors, notably between urban and suburban councillors.

Exploring the conflicts over intensification thus acts as analysis of what might be called the everyday un-politics of climate change. It focuses on the sites where patterns of GHG emissions are set in train by everyday decisions by the Council – where to allow what kinds of buildings to be built – which is a key site where contradictions between urban development processes and a low carbon future persist. On the one hand, these contradictions arise out of the sorts of processes that generate the decisions to build or not build in particular places – the political economy of intensification. On the other hand, they arise out of the cultural norms and practices that underpin the widespread hostility to intensification – the cultural politics of intensification. Between them, exploring these processes enable us to understand better the politics of low-carbon transitions.

If we explore these conflicts in detail for Ottawa, a number of themes emerge.³

The first point is simply that conflicts over intensification are highly concentrated in the urban core (see figure 2 below). Four wards in the urban core account for 68% of the projects that were covered in the media articles published and examined through our research. The councillors for those wards were also the most frequently mentioned actors in the media reports, alongside some key developer actors.

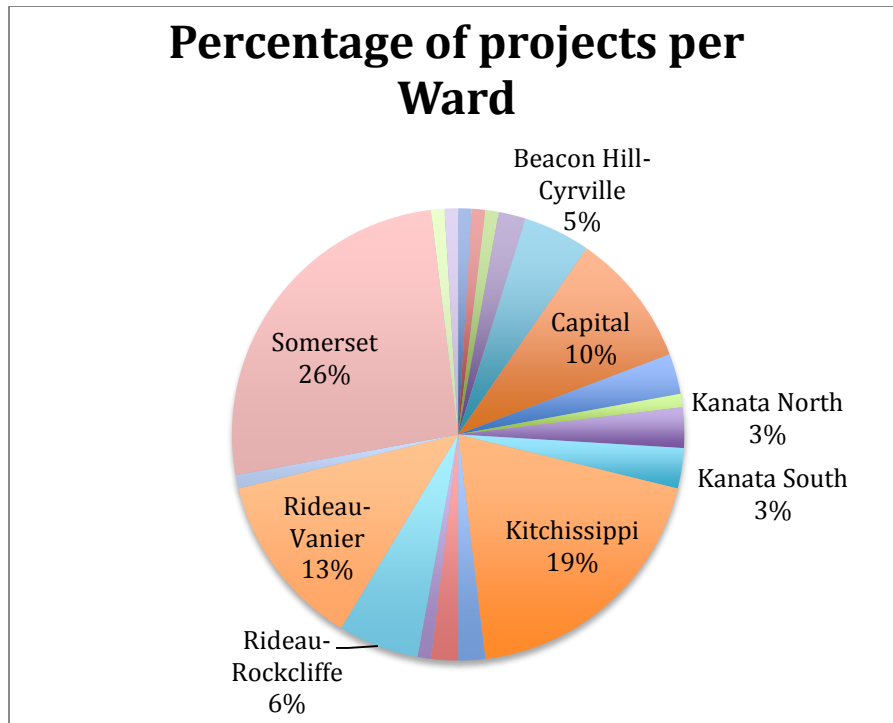


Figure 2. Percentage of projects per Ward (principal wards only shown)

The second point is that the character of interaction between opponents and proponents of individual projects demonstrates that specific instances of intensification are driven by traditional forces of urban political economy rather than specifically the explicit policy goals of liveable communities, low-carbon development, reduction in car use, and the like. Intensification is driven by traditional ‘growth coalition’ dynamics. This entails an essentially passive urban planning process – in effect where city councils simply zone different areas for different types of development. Developers buy land and then lobby to be able to build there, or sit on it until they are ready to do such lobbying. Intensification has simply changed their attention to which bits of land to buy. At times, the developers are explicit about this: According to developer Bill Mahotra, “by limiting the boundaries, what council has done is create land speculation... the demand for land inside the boundary

³ This analysis of conflicts over intensification in Ottawa is ongoing. This passage is based on preliminary analysis of the conflicts as represented in around 800 articles in Ottawa print media between 2001 and 2014, which is the entire population of articles where the term “intensification” appeared. I am grateful for research assistance from Merissa Mueller for work on this project. She also wrote her MA Major Research Paper out of this research.

has mushroomed, and this has resulted in the land ‘falling into the hands of a few people’” (quoted in Tencer 2004). Which projects go ahead are determined by developers judgment of profit potential, the higher the better for them. There are plenty of conflicts in the database of articles we constructed over them being able to get projects rezoned for height, or proposing buildings exceeding height zoning rules. At the same time, the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB)⁴ sits at the back of everyone’s head, and we see occasional direct threats by developers to go to the OMB to get council decisions overturned if they reject developers’ proposals. The Council’s intensification rules are focused on building at transit nodes, which creates pressures for very large projects near transit nodes, especially in Somerset and Kitchissippi wards along the transitway and O-train routes. Overall, then this is a pattern of decision-making which is more or less identical to that which historically produced sprawl and thus high-carbon development in North American cities, and it is far from clear that it will enable the sorts of low-carbon development proponents of intensification claim.

The third theme is the conflict between two competing visions of intensification as a form of urban development that I would characterise as “Le Corbusier vs Jane Jacobs.” Le Corbusier was the principal exponent of high modernist architecture and urban design that dominated the first part of the 20th century and centred on skyscrapers and urban freeways. Jane Jacobs became the main person articulating an alternative modernist vision in the 2nd half of the 20th century, organised around much lower buildings but dense streetscapes, walkable neighbourhoods and mixes between residential, industrial and commercial uses in urban neighbourhoods. There is a paradoxical relation in that those most likely to oppose individual intensification projects are at the same time those most likely to oppose sprawl, and also most likely to articulate a discourse in favour of acting on climate change. For example, Clive Doucet (former councillor for Capital ward), and in a less strong way Holmes (Somerset) and Chernushenko (also Capital ward), are the most consistent opponents of individual projects, at least as represented in this database of articles. What helps us understand this is a competing imaginary of urban development and urban politics within the discourse of intensification. The Doucet discourse in particular is (a) couched firmly in a framing of “developers vs community” – both sprawl and the form that intensification takes are driven by developers’ interests at the expense of the communities in which development occurs, so there is in effect a left-populist opposition to intensification occurring. Doucet frames his arguments explicitly in a Jane Jacobs-inspired normative vision of urban development, which is pro-density but anti-height.

As stated above, this research is ongoing and the material presented here is highly preliminary. But they are illustrative of the need to couch the shift to low carbon development in cities as a question of urban political economy – that we need to develop a means of integrating low carbon trajectories into the very core of urban development, from planning, housing, transport and the economic life that they support.

⁴ The OMB is the provincial regulatory agency that enforces planning rules on municipalities and adjudicates conflicts between developers, local communities, and city councils. Critics argue that almost always it sides with developers.

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