



SHARON BAMFORD PHOTO

As part of an Ontario Growth Secretariat teen-engagement project, several local teens gathered to examine the city core – an area Ontario wants to become a vibrant place where people live, learn, work and play. The teens didn't like what they found.

DOWNTOWN DOWNER

TEENS' VISION FOR DOWNTOWN MORE FAMILY-FRIENDLY

BY LAURIE WATT
STAFF

When a group of Barrie teens went on a scavenger hunt in downtown Barrie to look for fresh vegetables, a place to sit and relax, and a public toilet – they came up empty.

Instead, they found tattoo parlours, drug paraphernalia shops and poorly maintained public spaces.

As part of an Ontario Growth Secretariat teen-engagement project, Eastview's Bethany Knapp joined several other local teens to examine the city core – an area Ontario wants to become a vibrant place where people live, learn, work and play.

"(Downtown) doesn't attract a family-friendly crowd," the rural resident said. "We would put in new apartments for everybody, for families, not just condos, because they're expensive. We'd put in more offices and commercial shops, not just boutiques, because that's not for everyone. We'd put in a lot more homes and take out most of the bars, tattoo parlours and bong shops."

Local teens shared their ideas –

spurred on by online assignments and gathered through scavenger hunts and small-group sessions – with Ontario's Growth Secretariat, which designed and is implementing Places to Grow. Ontario is focusing on Barrie and its role as the region's urban centre, after intervening on the Barrie-Innisfil boundary dispute earlier this month.

A goal of Places to Grow is to create complete communities. Downtown Barrie lacks diversity in people and services, the young observer said.

"I like (Memorial) Square, although I found it was really an awkward place. It's not well maintained. Sometimes you find people sleeping on the benches. I wouldn't go there by myself," the 16-year-old Oro-Medonte resident said.

"Barrie needs to grow vertically. There are mostly two-storey buildings. Toronto is full of apartment buildings and the way to go is up. It adds interest and depth. It's nice to

have a big lawn and huge house, but we don't need that. If we can enjoy public places and live in a smaller area, that's better."

That's exactly what Ontario wants to see happen in downtown Barrie, an urban growth centre where intensification must occur and the density tripled within 25 years.



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BETHANY KNAPP

"Downtown Toronto is really fun," Knapp said, and Barrie does have some solid but bare bones for a vibrant downtown. There's the MacLaren Art Centre, a small performing arts centre, and great waterfront parks.

"I like the Spirit Catcher; it really helps with Barrie's identity. It's a symbol for the city."

Downtown, too, should be a vibrant place for business and tourists. "We want to see a big hotel; there's nowhere to stay now, except the Holiday Inn and the south end (hotels). We'd put in a hotel, with a great view of the water."

She did not know about the city's plan for a hotel-convention centre on what's now the Simcoe Street parking lot; the city is working with a developer on a plan that also includes condos, as well as retail and restaurants, which would front onto Memorial Square.

Putting more people into downtown to live and work would make the downtown friendlier, as well as reduce dependence on cars – a real problem for Barrie, she said.

"You have to drive everywhere. The only people who take buses are seniors and students; once you get a car, you don't take the bus," Knapp said. That would change if buses connected communities and enabled people to conveniently travel from one city to another.

The environment, she said, must be a priority and new buildings should feature green roofs.

"They help with heat and air-conditioning costs, and look nice from the sky. Wildlife, like squirrels and bees, can live up there," she added.

"It was an interesting project. We all want to feel a lot safer (downtown). We want families. We want it to be a fun place year-round."