

3 Edge Cities, Mega Regions and Incubation: Vaughan in its Metropolitan Context

The “Edge City” concept was developed by an American Author Joel Garreau, in his 1991 book *Edge City: Life on the Frontier*. At the time, Garreau was attempting to address what he viewed as the third wave of urban form moving into new frontiers. He noted that after the mass suburbanization of residential uses post World War II, came the “mall” of America, with the movement of major retail out of the downtown core in the ‘60s and ‘70s. This was followed closely by the movement of much of the rest of the economic activity traditionally centred on the downtown area, including the majority of jobs, out to the periphery of the city through to the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.

In the American context, edge cities:

- Had 5 million square feet or more of leasable office space, or the workplace of the “Information age”
- Had 600,000 square feet or more of leasable retail space, or a “fair-sized” mall of 80-100 shops and boutiques
- Accommodated more jobs than bedrooms
- Were perceived by the population as a regional centre of jobs, shopping and entertainment
- Were primarily rural or residential as recently as 30 years before

These centres exemplified the decentralization of economic and commercial activity. Office campuses and large-scale mall developments replaced office towers, street-level storefronts, and downtown department stores. In a way, this has been the dominant urban form in the last half century, giving rise to American centres like the Meadowlands/Hoboken in New Jersey, White Plains in New York, Tysons Corner in Virginia, and Burbank in California. In the Canadian context, Garreau suggests that the North York-North

Yonge, Midtown-Yorkville, and DVP-401 areas could be considered Edge Cities for Toronto.

Much of the growth and economic opportunity in the edge city was fuelled by lower land prices, greenfield development opportunities, and market demand. Land was simply cheaper and more plentiful in the peripheries of metropolitan areas and permitted lower density developments. As well, much of the workforce of the metropolitan area had vacated the older city in favour of the suburbs, and the jobs and population-related services were simply following the workforce to those areas.

There has been considerable debate between urban thinkers about the appropriateness and sustainability of this type of development. Some of these Edge Cities were never really “Cities” in the traditional sense of the word, in that they never fully replicated the urban form and systems that were present in traditional downtowns and metro areas. The resulting dispersed urban form and segregated land uses, built to automobile scale, makes improvement through redevelopment, intensification and transit expansion slightly more difficult than redevelopment in many grid-based older urban areas. This challenge is highlighted by the most recent economic downturn being felt across the globe, and the effects that it is having on urban form and many of these Edge Cities or older suburban cities.

Suburban areas populated through lax mortgage and lending practices, especially in the US, have been hit particularly hard by the economic downturn. As well, edge cities and periphery areas through the US and Canadian Great Lakes region, long a manufacturing heartland but more recently affected by industrial decline have also experienced challenges. These areas are struggling with high rates of residential and office vacancy, declining population, the shuttering of retail outlets and malls, and generally diminishing economic opportunity. Many of those areas are now struggling to re-invent themselves, primarily by implementing policies to encourage more

urban development, such as higher densities, transit expansions, or mixed use developments. And though some strong progress is being made in many of these areas, it remains a very difficult proposition to redevelop to accommodate uses and systems that these areas were never designed to accommodate.

So what will be the fate of these edge cities given a somewhat new reality in the global economy, where traditional patterns of consumption and production are giving way to entirely new economic systems?

In 2010, Richard Florida released *The Great Reset* to explain the new realities in which cities and Mega Regions (As identified in his article *The Rise of the Mega Region*¹, and popularized in his book *Who's Your City?*) will compete for people and business investment. Florida suggests that after each historical economic downturn, there has been an economic “reset” that changed the way people lived and worked, and shaped the geographic and economic distribution of cities and regions. The “new normal” that has emerged as a result of the most recent economic downturn will reflect:

- New attitudes towards consumption and ownership, especially for big-ticket items like houses and cars
- The transition of millions of service jobs into middle-class careers that utilize the creative and innovative talents of those workers
- New and different types of infrastructure for moving goods, people, and ideas at a faster pace
- A very different and much denser economic landscape organized into “Mega Regions” that drive the development of new industries, jobs, and quality of life

¹ Florida, R., Gulden, T., and Mellander, C. *The Rise of the Mega Region*. The Martin Prosperity Institute, 2007.

In the context of geographic distribution, Florida suggests the Mega Region is the new economic region through which cities will compete at the global scale. These agglomerations combine older downtowns and urban areas, as well as the sprawling offices and malls in edge cities and smaller areas in the urban periphery into larger mega regions that in some cases span all other boundaries, including political. One of the key elements of success within these mega regions, Florida suggests, is the ability to move people and goods – “the tangible bits of the real world” – at a similar rate with the flow of electronic information through the virtual world.

Alternative modes of transportation, from intra-regional high-speed rail, to regional heavy or light rail, paired with mixed-use intensification to support that development are primarily seen as the ways to connect the mega region. This is especially relevant given the intensification that could occur in these areas, and associated congestion should traditional forms of commuting continue. Overall, this suggests that areas more efficiently connected to the major city-centres that will have the highest concentrations of jobs, innovation, and commercial activity, will be positioned well for economic prosperity as the new economy progresses.

Vaughan does not have many of the developments that would characterize it as an “Edge City” in the traditional sense of the term. Vaughan does have a significant portion of leasable retail space and status as a destination for retail and entertainment, as well as a significant portion of residential development. However, the City lacks some of the major office development that has occurred in other cities surrounding large centres, such as Markham or Mississauga in Toronto, or Kanata in Ottawa. The city is instead home to significant industrial and manufacturing uses that have instead been the primary driver of the economy.

In fact, Vaughan is more of a city on the edge, than an “Edge City”. There is no question that the City’s location at the edge of Toronto provides a major opportunity. In recognition of the demand coming

from the Northern GTA to access the downtown area, the TTC is expanding the York-Spadina line to the city, terminating at the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. The transit connectivity, that the subway and associated expansion of regional transit to feed that subway line represents, ensures that there is potential in the VMC for a range of commercial, office, and residential uses.

Of primary importance to the city are the existing and planned transportation connections that connect it with, and represent important features for the Tor-Mon-Tawa (Toronto-Montreal-Ottawa) mega region. The subway represents a high-capacity connection to downtown Toronto. Simply put, this connection opens a range of opportunities for the city to connect with the rest of the Mega Region, primarily for the movement of people. It positions Vaughan as a “gateway” or entrypoint to the GTA and the mega region beyond, a centrepoint in the movement of goods and people in and out of the nation’s largest market. And with the movement of people comes the movement of ideas, creativity, and innovation. Vaughan has an opportunity to use its “edge” position to become the focal point of new development in the GTA, and an incubator of next generation enterprise. Where traditional economic development programs may seek to designate specific buildings or offices as incubators, Vaughan has a unique opportunity to make the entire City an incubator, attracting, nurturing and growing the next generation of economic activities for the broader region. By setting itself as an incubator of design and innovation, Vaughan will position itself as a city on the cutting edge, rather than a city on the peripheral edge.

By way of that connection to Toronto, Vaughan is connected to other important transportation networks throughout the Mega Region as well. Should high-speed rail ever develop along the Windsor-Quebec corridor, the City will be directly connected to a major hub along that rail line. But Vaughan’s strengths for business and economic development are about much more than being on the edge of Toronto. As home to the largest CPR intermodal facility in Canada,

the city represents a major economic gateway for both import and export within the Mega Region, via a transportation method that is widely believed to be a “greener” choice than other methods. The city is one of the Mega Region’s gateways to the Asia-Pacific region, and one of the Asia-Pacific Region’s gateways to Tor-Mon-Tawa. The Asia Pacific Region gateway opens opportunity to the world’s largest market for green building products and advanced manufactured goods, among other economic opportunity.

These strengths are in addition to those that come with excellent highway connections, proximity to Canada’s largest airport, and strengths in goods production and movement. Vaughan is not an Edge City, it is a city on the edge of the economic region, set for population and employment growth. In summary, if cities and regions are to start competing globally as larger economic units, then Vaughan is positioned to be a leader within the larger economic region.

As an area forming the urban edge of the GTA, with a large supply of greenfield lands and development opportunities, Vaughan is a key location for future residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial development in the GTA and the larger economic region. In and of itself this is a strong asset to draw investment to the community. However, the city should not be content to house the same types of developments that have characterized urban areas in the outer areas of metropolitan centres over the last several decades. The focus should be on the development of high-value targets: businesses and talented people that can assist with the development of the city and produce benefits to the local economy that increase economic, social, and environmental well-being.

In order to ensure that Vaughan differentiates itself from other similar areas in this competition, an alternative approach to economic development service delivery could be used in light of the city’s vacant lands, industrial base, infrastructure, and geographic positioning. While other cities mention the desire to create an

incubator of innovation and business venture, Vaughan has the potential to **be** an incubator of innovation and business venture. The Economic Development Department, the Vaughan Business Enterprise Centre, and a range of other public and private partners will focus on creating a proactive and unified system of business support services to nurture business ventures of all types and sizes. Instead of a bricks and mortar facility, the City and its vacant lands and development opportunities will provide the spaces in which business ventures can grow.

For example, the VMC has the opportunity to develop as an incubator of research and design, culture, and environmental sustainability. City policies should encourage these uses, economic development services should expand the local knowledge base to encourage innovative development, investment attraction should focus on bringing these types of firms to the VMC, and work should be done to encourage collaboration and cross-fertilization of ideas between the businesses in the VMC. Doing so will facilitate the attraction of cutting edge people to spur creativity and innovation and position the city and the local economy within the “new normal.”

Similarly, the Vaughan Enterprise Zone represents an opportunity to demonstrate industrial operations within the “new normal”, where sustainability and innovation are more prominent. The City can attract innovative industrial firms, while encouraging existing firms to locate there and expand. As a largely vacant area with minimal existing infrastructure, there is an opportunity to develop a true eco-district - one that utilizes cutting edge technologies like district heating and co-generation - to “green” traditionally energy-intensive industries.

The city’s geographic positioning and connectivity provide businesses access well beyond the city’s borders, while those same assets provide the world access to the City’s business ventures and creative capacity. Overall, the focus will be on creating resources, tools, expertise, and infrastructure that may not be accessible

elsewhere that can facilitate these interactions, and support the growth of businesses of all sizes, in all areas of the economy.