

Plan for the Next 25 Years — Not Just the Next Election

Good Government Must Look Beyond a Four-Year Term

Municipal elections happen every four years.

But many of the decisions City Council makes will affect Burlington residents for decades.

A road, community centre, park, stormwater system or other major piece of infrastructure may serve the community for 50 years or more. Decisions about our rural lands, waterfront, tree canopy and natural environment can shape Burlington permanently. Decisions about growth can create infrastructure and operating costs that future generations of taxpayers inherit.

That is why I have consistently believed Burlington needs to think much further ahead than the next election.

My approach is:

Set a long-term direction. Understand where Burlington is actually going. Invest when the evidence says we need to. Measure the results. Adjust when circumstances change.

That is how I believe a well-managed city should operate.

Bringing Long-Term Strategic Planning to Burlington

In 2015, I was instrumental in persuading Burlington Council to undertake something unusual in municipal government: develop a **25-year Strategic Plan**.

The objective was simple.

Instead of each Council beginning again with its own four-year list of priorities, Burlington needed to decide what kind of community we wanted to become over the longer term.

That work established a framework extending well beyond any individual Council or election.

Burlington has since continued that approach, most recently through **Horizon 2050**, which looks ahead another generation.

I strongly support continuing long-term strategic planning.

But a long-term plan should never become a document that sits on a shelf.

It must influence what we actually do.

Long-Term Planning Is Not Long-Term Predicting

There is an important distinction.

Planning 25 years ahead does not mean pretending we know exactly what Burlington will look like 25 years from now.

We don't.

Population forecasts change.

Housing markets change.

Technology changes.

Transportation patterns change.

Workplaces change.

Demographics change.

Senior governments change policies.

Economic conditions change.

And residents change the way they live, work and use municipal services.

The purpose of long-term planning is therefore not to predict the future perfectly.

It is to **prepare Burlington to respond intelligently as the future unfolds.**

Burlington's Challenge Has Changed

This is particularly important today.

Several years ago, Burlington was being told to prepare for very substantial population and housing growth.

Those projections influenced assumptions about infrastructure, transportation and municipal services.

Since then, circumstances have changed.

We must continue planning responsibly for whatever future development occurs, but we should not automatically spend taxpayers' money today simply because an earlier projection suggested something might be required years from now.

Burlington's challenge has changed.

We need to solve the problems Burlington actually has today while maintaining the flexibility to respond to the growth and change that actually occurs tomorrow.

That is responsible long-term planning.

A 25-Year Plan Needs a Five-Year Financial Reality Check

Strategy and finance cannot be separated.

Several years ago, I introduced the concept of a **rolling five-year financial outlook** to Burlington's budget process.

It gives Council a much clearer understanding of where today's decisions may take us financially.

A decision that looks affordable in the first year may create significant costs in years three, four and five.

New facilities require staff.

New infrastructure requires maintenance.

New programs create recurring operating costs.

Labour agreements have multi-year consequences.

Debt commitments extend into future budgets.

Council needs to understand those implications **before** making the decision.

The five-year financial outlook should therefore continue to be strengthened and used as an important test of affordability.

A 25-year strategic direction tells us where we want to go.

A rolling five-year financial outlook helps tell us whether the decisions we are making to get there are affordable.

Infrastructure Requires Generational Thinking

Infrastructure is one of the clearest examples of why municipal government must think long term.

Burlington owns billions of dollars of roads, parks, buildings, stormwater infrastructure and other assets.

Those assets have useful lives measured in decades.

Failing to maintain them doesn't eliminate the cost.

It transfers the problem to a future Council and usually makes the eventual solution more expensive.

I therefore support disciplined, long-term asset management and infrastructure renewal.

But the same discipline must apply when we consider building something new.

Before making a major capital commitment, Council should understand:

Why is it needed?

When will it actually be needed?

What will it cost to build?

What will it cost to operate?

What will it cost to maintain?

When will it eventually need to be replaced?

And who should pay?

Build what we need, when we need it—and understand the full lifecycle cost before we build it.

Plan for Growth — But Follow the Evidence

Burlington must be ready for future development.

Infrastructure and services need to keep pace when that development occurs.

But infrastructure planning should be connected to actual development, not simply forecasts.

If development accelerates, we need to respond.

If development slows, we should reconsider the timing of major investments.

That is particularly important because taxpayers can otherwise be asked to finance expensive infrastructure years before it is actually required.

This connects directly with my commitment to **Make Growth Pay Its Way**.

Growth should bring the infrastructure and services it requires and contribute its fair share toward the cost.

Long-term planning should protect future residents without unnecessarily burdening today's taxpayers.

Design Services for the Burlington We Are Becoming

Long-term planning is also about recognizing how our population is changing.

Burlington is an aging community.

Technology is changing how people expect to interact with government.

Travel patterns are changing.

Residents increasingly expect services to be convenient, responsive and available digitally.

We should not assume that the way the City delivered a service 20 years ago is automatically the best way to deliver it 20 years from now.

That is why I place such importance on **strategy, process, performance and technology**.

Every major municipal service should periodically face a simple question:

If we were designing this service today, would we design it this way?

If the answer is no, we should be willing to change it.

Modernize Transit for the Future

Transit is an excellent example.

The traditional transit model was built around large buses, fixed routes and fixed schedules.

Technology now makes a much more flexible model possible.

Smaller electric vehicles can increasingly be dynamically matched with passengers and destinations, while large buses can remain where passenger volumes justify them.

That is why I support testing and progressively introducing on-demand transit.

This isn't simply about buying different buses.

It is about asking what Burlington's transportation system should look like 10, 20 or 25 years from now.

Instead of asking residents to organize their lives around the bus, we should increasingly organize transit around the passenger.

Long-term planning should help us redesign services—not simply preserve existing systems indefinitely.

Plan Now for Burlington's Transportation Bottlenecks

The same thinking applies to road congestion.

Burlington sits at a critical transportation bottleneck where the QEW, Highway 403 and Highway 407 converge and traffic moves toward the Burlington Bay crossings.

The Province has begun addressing highway and interchange capacity through Burlington.

That work is important.

But we also need to think much further ahead about the Burlington Bay bottleneck itself.

Whether the eventual answer involves additional bridge capacity, a tunnel beneath the Burlington Bay entrance to Lake Ontario, or another solution, these projects require years of planning, engineering, environmental review and investment.

We cannot wait until the transportation system reaches crisis before beginning that conversation.

Keep highway traffic on the highways is a problem we must address today.

Ensuring there is sufficient highway capacity decades from now requires planning today.

Prepare for More Severe Weather

The 2014 flood demonstrated another consequence of thinking beyond the immediate budget year.

After that event, I strongly advocated significant investments at Burlington and Halton Region to improve sanitary and storm sewer infrastructure, contributing to approximately **\$120 million in improvements**.

Climate resilience now needs to be incorporated into infrastructure decisions throughout the City.

When we rebuild a road, renew a park, replace stormwater infrastructure or construct a municipal building, we should ask what conditions that asset may face over its entire useful life.

Trees, naturalized areas, rain gardens, permeable surfaces and other forms of green infrastructure can also become part of that response where they provide measurable benefits.

Planning for severe weather after the next flood is too late.

Protect Decisions That Last Generations

Some of Burlington's most important long-term decisions were made before many of today's residents lived here.

More than 50 years ago, a previous Council established and protected the distinction between Burlington's urban and rural areas.

Approximately **50% of Burlington's land mass remains rural today**.

It includes agricultural lands, forests and woodlands, natural heritage areas, heritage properties and significant portions of the Niagara Escarpment.

That decision has helped define Burlington.

Previous generations could have chosen differently.

Had they done so, we could not simply recreate those lands today.

The same principle applies to our waterfront, parks, natural areas and mature tree canopy.

Some decisions can be reversed.

Others cannot.

When a decision may permanently change Burlington, Council should think in generations rather than election cycles.

Use Technology and AI to Improve Government

The next 25 years will bring technological change that is difficult to fully imagine today.

Municipal government should not resist that change.

We should use it intelligently.

Artificial intelligence, automation, better data and digital services have significant potential to improve productivity, reduce administrative work, make services easier for residents to access and help Council understand whether programs are actually producing results.

Technology isn't an objective by itself.

The test is whether it helps us:

provide better service, improve productivity, reduce unnecessary cost or make better decisions.

As technology changes, Burlington should be prepared to redesign processes rather than simply automate inefficient ones.

Measure Results — Not Activity

Long-term plans are only valuable if we know whether they are working.

Government often reports how much it spends, how many programs it operates or how many activities it undertakes.

Those measures have value.

But the more important question is:

What changed as a result?

Did congestion improve?

Did transit ridership increase?

Did the subsidy per passenger decline?

Did crime decrease?

Did flooding risk decline?

Did infrastructure condition improve?

Did service become faster?

Did taxpayers receive better value?

Long-term strategy must be accompanied by meaningful performance measurement.

What gets measured can be managed.

Adjust When the Facts Change

Perhaps the most important part of long-term planning is being willing to change the plan.

Changing circumstances are not evidence that planning failed.

Ignoring changing circumstances is.

Every major assumption should periodically be tested against what is actually happening.

Population.

Development.

Ridership.

Traffic.

Revenue.

Service demand.

Infrastructure condition.

Demographics.

Technology.

If the evidence changes, our plans should change with it.

That is why I believe Burlington needs both a long-term strategic direction and disciplined annual measurement.

Direction should be long term. Decisions should remain adaptable.

My Priorities for the Next Four Years

- 1. Maintain Burlington's 25-year perspective.** Continue using Horizon 2050 to keep major decisions focused on the community we want to leave future generations.
- 2. Strengthen the rolling five-year financial outlook.** Ensure Council understands the multi-year financial consequences of today's budget decisions.
- 3. Connect capital spending to demonstrated need.** Build infrastructure when it is required rather than automatically following outdated growth projections.
- 4. Measure lifecycle costs.** Consider construction, operation, maintenance and eventual replacement before committing taxpayers to major new infrastructure.
- 5. Make growth pay its way.** Ensure development contributes its fair share toward the infrastructure and services it requires.
- 6. Modernize municipal services.** Use technology, AI and service redesign to improve productivity, convenience and value.
- 7. Plan transportation decades ahead.** Address today's congestion while advocating now for the highway and Burlington Bay capacity future generations will require.
- 8. Build climate resilience into infrastructure planning.** Prepare roads, stormwater systems, parks and municipal assets for increasingly severe weather.
- 9. Protect Burlington's permanent assets.** Preserve our rural and natural heritage, waterfront, parks and tree canopy for future generations.
- 10. Measure results and adjust.** Regularly compare forecasts with reality and change our plans when the evidence changes.

Leave Burlington Stronger Than We Found It

The purpose of municipal government isn't simply to get through the next budget or the next election.

We are temporary stewards of a city that existed before us and will continue long after us.

Previous generations made decisions whose benefits we enjoy today.

They protected Burlington's rural lands.

They acquired parks and waterfront.

They planted trees that now shade our neighbourhoods.

They built infrastructure that has served generations of residents.

Our responsibility is to demonstrate the same foresight.

That doesn't mean trying to predict exactly what Burlington will look like in 2050.

It means making sound decisions today while preserving the ability of future generations to make their own choices.

Think long term. Plan realistically. Invest when needed. Measure the results. Adjust when circumstances change.

And always ask one final question:

Will this decision leave Burlington stronger for the generation that follows us?

Plan for the next 25 years — not just the next election.

Paul Sharman

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