West Lincoln

Cultivating West Lincoln
New Official Plan

Discussion Paper

Conformity and Implementation

November 2026

Introduction

The new Official Plan must explain not only what West Lincoln wants to achieve, but also how the Plan will be read, applied, monitored and updated. Clear implementation policies can make routine work more efficient while preserving public review for decisions that change land-use direction.

This is especially important because planning responsibilities have shifted from Niagara Region to the Township, the Niagara Official Plan now applies as a local plan, and provincial requirements continue to change. The new Plan should be durable enough to respond to new conditions without becoming vague or unpredictable.



Aerial view of agricultural lands in West Lincoln.

Direction from Existing Documents

Official Plan Consolidation

West Lincoln's published Official Plan consolidation predates later amendments and secondary-plan work. West Lincoln Official Plan Section 18.12 and Niagara Official Plan Section 7.2 allow limited clerical, formatting and mapping corrections without an amendment where policy intent is unchanged. The new Plan should define these administrative changes clearly.

Regional Planning Transition

Since March 31, 2025, the Niagara Official Plan has applied as an official plan of each local municipality in Niagara. West Lincoln must integrate the policies, schedules and site-specific directions that continue to apply locally, remove obsolete Regional approval roles, and retain clear coordination with Niagara Region as an infrastructure and service provider, including environmental and natural heritage expertise.

Monitoring and Secondary Plans

West Lincoln's current Plan, Niagara Official Plan Section 7.6 and OPA 63 call for monitoring of growth, housing, employment, infrastructure and secondary-plan implementation. OPA 63 also uses Block Plans and Master Environmental Servicing Plans to coordinate development in the Smithville expansion area.

Application Requirements

West Lincoln Official Plan Section 18.16 contains pre-consultation and complete-application requirements. Bill 185 made pre-application consultation optional for applicants, while Bill 17 limits the information and studies municipalities may require before a planning application is considered complete. Bill 23 exempted residential developments of 10 units or fewer from site plan control, subject to limited exceptions, and removed the ability to regulate architectural appearance or landscaping solely for aesthetic reasons. The new Official Plan should reflect these changes while establishing clear and reasonable requirements for matters the Township can still regulate.

New Provincial Official Plan Structure

Bill 98, enacted in June 2026, establishes a standardized Official Plan structure. For West Lincoln, the transition date is January 1, 2029 for a new or revised Plan adopted after that date, while further provincial implementation details are still being refined. The new Plan should be organized so it can adapt without losing locally important agricultural, hamlet and Smithville policy.

Community Benefits and Permit Systems

The former Section 37 height-and-density bonusing system has been replaced by the community benefits charge framework, which can help fund growth-related community facilities and services. A charge requires a strategy and by-law and may apply only to developments with at least five storeys and ten residential units. A Community Planning Permit System combines zoning, site plan and minor variance processes within a defined area into a single application and approval process. The new Official Plan could enable its future use in appropriate areas without committing to a Township-wide system.

Emerging Policy Ideas

Implementation should be straightforward for routine matters, rigorous where public interests are affected, and suited to West Lincoln's urban, hamlet and agricultural contexts.

One Coherent Official Plan

- Consolidate applicable West Lincoln and Niagara policies, approved amendments, secondary plans and site-specific provisions into one searchable Plan with consistent definitions and schedules.
- Include transition policies for existing uses, zoning, applications, draft approvals, agreements and appeals so the new Plan does not create avoidable uncertainty.

Flexibility with Clear Limits

- Use objectives, criteria, ranges and phasing triggers where conditions may change, while keeping firm boundaries and requirements where certainty is needed.
- Allow only clerical corrections, approved base-map updates and formatting changes administratively. Changes to land use or policy intent should continue to require an Official Plan amendment.

Proportionate Application Requirements

- Encourage useful voluntary pre-application consultation, and organize studies as core or condition-specific requirements.
- Match the submission package to the proposal. A farm-related or small hamlet application should not automatically require the same studies as a major Smithville subdivision.

Monitoring that Informs Decisions

- Prepare a concise regular report on housing and employment growth, intensification and greenfield density, affordability, land supply, agricultural lot creation, infrastructure capacity, secondary-plan phasing and application timelines.
- Use the results to identify when servicing, growth forecasts or other policies need review rather than creating separate and duplicative reporting systems.

Secondary Plan Integration

- Carry approved secondary-plan policies and schedules into clearly identified parts of the new Plan, with one approach to interpretation and conflict.
- Preserve Smithville's Block Plan, servicing and phasing framework, while separating Council-approved policy from technical guidance that can be updated more easily.

Community Benefits and Possible Permit System

- Assess whether a community benefits charge would be practical for the scale of development expected in Smithville; it is unlikely to be relevant in hamlets or the agricultural area.
- Consider enabling a Community Planning Permit System only for a defined Smithville area where its up-front work and reduced case-by-case flexibility would be justified. It should not be applied Township-wide without a demonstrated need.

Implementation

Retain a dedicated Implementation section in the new Official Plan. It should set out interpretation rules, transition provisions, monitoring, application requirements, secondary-plan relationships, available financial and approval tools, and the process for administrative updates and future amendments. This section will be the practical bridge between the Plan's policy directions and day-to-day decisions.



Aerial view of agricultural lands in West Lincoln.