

The Political Marketing of Urban Densification

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Introduction

Urban densification has been cited worldwide as a potential strategy to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and increase the sustainability of cities. This "green growth densification" concept represents the forward thinking approach required to address climate change but as always, public opinion will determine the success of these initiatives. Using framing theory, this research will explore the current state of public opinion on densification in Ottawa, Ontario. Ultimately, this research will argue that in order to "sell" the idea of densification to the public, politicians must market density as a strategic climate change tool.

Density's Public Relations Problem

Existing Perceptions of Densification

- "Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY) attitudes
- Concerns of increased traffic and congestion,
- Fear of changing the neighbourhood's character
- High density areas as unsafe for individuals
- Expensive and inaccessible for families

Ruming (2013)

Methodology

A media content analysis was used to assess Ottawa residents' opinions on densification. News outlets play an important role in shaping opinion and can offer an insight into public perceptions. The local newspaper, The Ottawa Citizen was used to retrieve headlines for analysis. Headlines offer an overview of the full article's tone and style. Each individual headline was analyzed for 2 variables:

- 1) Tone: Whether the language used was positive, negative or neutral.
- 2) Content: Did the headline make the connection between climate change, the environment and density?

Data

82

Newspaper
Headlines

365 days

Search Period
Jan - Dec 2013

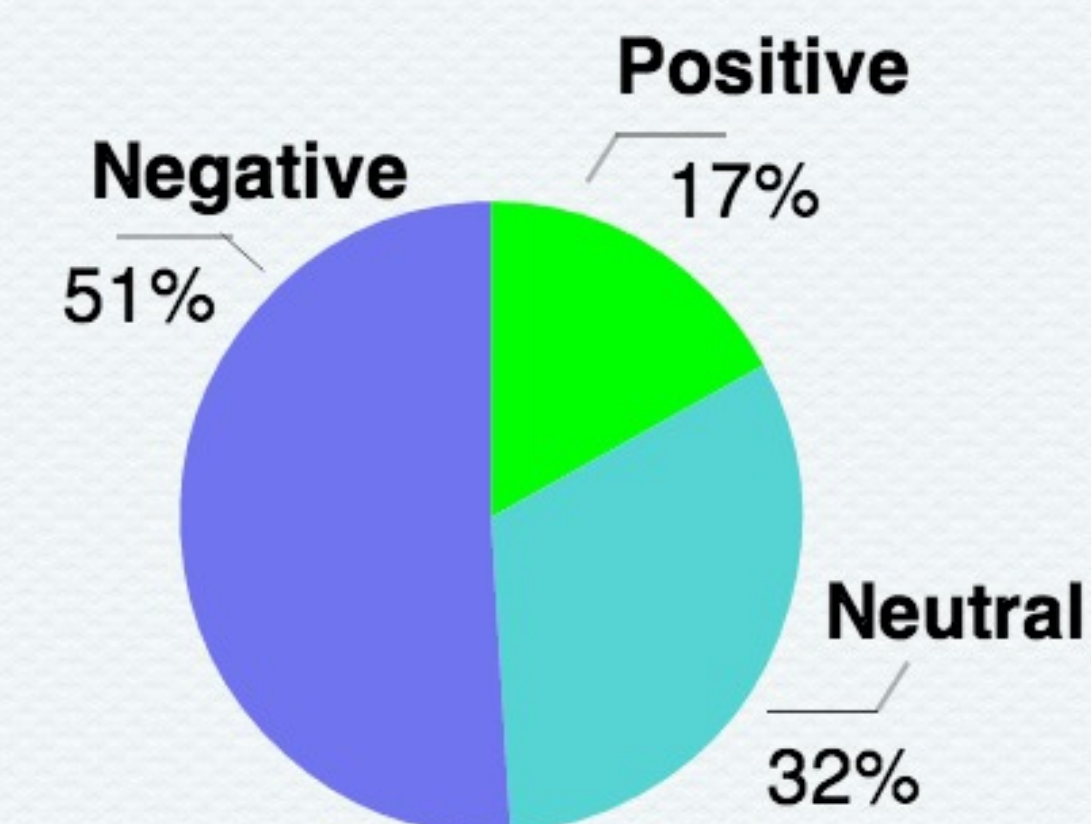
Source

LexisNexis
Database

Results

The City of Ottawa includes densification targets in its land use plans therefore the densification is currently an issue for the public and politicians. The media analysis found that the majority of headlines were negatively framed. Furthermore, The majority of headlines did not make the connection between the environment and densification.

Graph 1: Percentage of Articles by Tone



Graph 2: Percentage of Headlines by Content



2%

Of headlines related to densification made the connection between climate change, environment and densification.

SAMPLEHEADLINE

"How green is our valley?; Building energy-efficient homes in Ottawa is becoming mainstream but can still be a tough sell, industry says." June 11, 2013, The Ottawa Citizen



98%

Of headlines related to densification did not mention climate change or the environment.

SAMPLEHEADLINE

"Developer plans two tallest buildings; Richcraft argues for 48-storey towers on Carling Avenue."

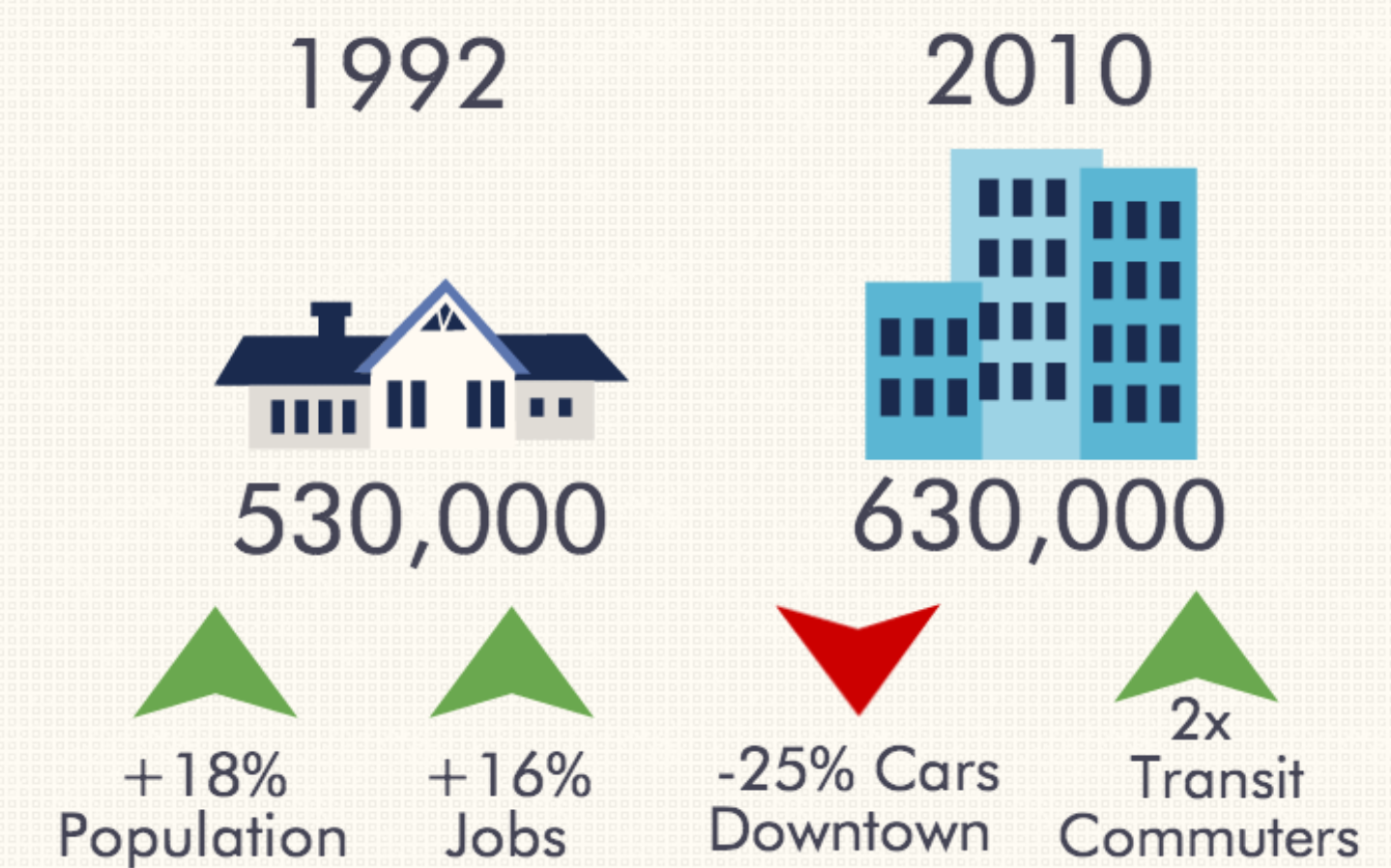
June 11, 2013, The Ottawa Citizen

Discussion: Reframing the Density Narrative

The academic community has already made the connection between climate change and density. As evidenced by the media analysis, it is apparent that this narrative is not yet present among the public. In order to shift existing negative perceptions, this research proposes "green growth density" as an alternative frame. The OECD defines "green growth" as the simultaneous prioritization of economic growth with environmental protection.

Green Growth Example

Vancouver & Green Growth Densification



The Political Marketing of Green Growth Densification

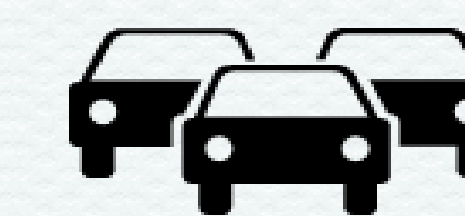
Existing Density Frames



1: High density housing is unaffordable for individuals and families



2: High density housing will change the neighbourhood character

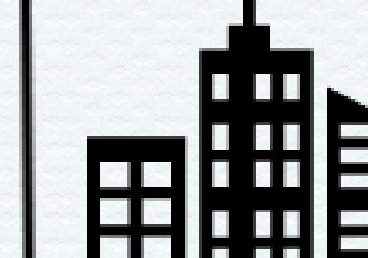


3: High density housing will bring increased traffic

New Density Frames



1: Urban areas reduce the need for vehicles, which can save \$10,000/year/car



2: Dense cities attract economic activity and highly skilled people



3: Strategic densification that is mixed-use allows residents to live near and walk to amenities

Conclusion

Based on the negative perceptions regarding densification, the green growth concept was offered as an alternative strategy. Reframing densification as tool to induce environmental and economic benefits can change the current conversation on densification. Further research should be developed to determine how to better "market" densification to a public that already holds misconceptions of the issue.

Works Cited

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