

## &gt; CONSERVATION

## Preserving Ontario's true natural treasure

Tougher Growth Plan, curbing urban sprawl is key to region's future

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Earth Day is not always a happy time: It is more likely to remind us of our crimes against the natural environment than our success at protecting it. But this spring's event brings a rare opportunity to celebrate. The imminent passage of new legislation strengthening the Ontario Greenbelt and the land-use policies that support it marks a new era in the natural history of Canada's most populous region. What was once a contentious innovation, subject to review and repeal, is now permanent. No environmental initiative is more worth celebrating in the spring of 2017.

Acting on a promise to review the 2006 legislation 10 years after it came into effect, the provincial government fielded more than 700 requests from landowners to shrink the Greenbelt. It listened to dozens of municipalities and developers complaining that the anti-sprawl measures of the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe — sister legislation to the Greenbelt act — were too strict.

In response, the Wynne government is proposing to expand the Greenbelt and introduce even stricter anti-sprawl measures into the Growth Plan.

"They really stood up, and prevented this Greenbelt from becoming the Swiss cheese belt," says Burkhard Mausberg, CEO of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation.

But virtually any provincial government would have done the same, according to David MacDonald of Environics Research. Having polled Ontarians about their attitude to the Greenbelt regularly for a decade, MacDonald reports near-universal support for the measure in affected cities, suburbs and farmlands alike.

Golden Horseshoe residents see the Greenbelt as one of this generation's most important contributions to the future of the province, he said. "There's very strong agreement with that."

At the same time, they remain unimpressed by the argument from developers and their allies that the Greenbelt is helping to drive up house prices by restricting the supply of land available for development — despite the existence of 100,000 hectares of mixed land earmarked for potential growth between it and the current suburban frontier.

"It's pretty clear from our research



DEB SWIDROVICH



TOWN OF UXBRIDGE



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Scenes from around the Greenbelt: white-tailed deer; cycling the Uxbridge Trail; an aerial view of the Uxbridge Trail; a great blue heron.

that Ontarians don't buy that argument," MacDonald said. "And even if someone were to make it, they would say, 'You know what? Our environment is important to us. We can find other solutions.'"

Buoyed by such views — and amid growing public concern for source-water protection — the province decided to expand the Greenbelt to include 28 rivers, streams and wetlands associated with the already-protected uplands. It also established a new process to extend the Greenbelt to cover entire new regions.

"That's going to be an interesting and a very useful conversation," Mausberg said. "It has shifted from people wanting to take land out of the Greenbelt to wanting to see it expanded."

Left out of the Greenbelt in 2006, Waterloo Region subsequently adopted a new official plan that matched the Greenbelt's natural landscape protections and exceeded the Growth Plan's objectives for urban intensification. "We've effectively created a greenbelt in our plan in the absence of the province officially extending it," said Kevin Eby, former

director of community planning in Waterloo Region. "The result, he added, is a public primed and eager for formal inclusion."

"We need these large, landscape-level systems," said veteran Waterloo activist Kevin Thomason. "Nature doesn't work in fragments." Expanding the Greenbelt to Waterloo will enhance large-scale landscape connectivity and also add a second level of protection "that will make it a little harder for some conniving developer to undo down the road," according to Thomason.

Even Simcoe County north of Toronto, notorious for its continuing promotion of sprawling "leapfrog" development over the Greenbelt, is beginning to turn. The recently formed Simcoe County Greenbelt Coalition has brought together more than 30 local groups to demand their besieged county's inclusion in the Greenbelt.

"Citizens are starting to see that these rural vistas are becoming less and less common," said Margaret Prophet, coalition co-chair. "One week there's a farm field, the next week there's houses in the middle of nowhere."

For now, Simcoe retains a "complete agricultural system," according to Prophet. "And we keep fragmenting it with pipes under the ground, highways over the ground and sprawl wherever." But as a growing number of disenchanted citizens now realize, the obvious solution is now knocking at their door.

Burgeoning popular support for the Greenbelt has vindicated the policy in ways that even its early advocates never anticipated. But they also realize it is not enough to ensure its long-term survival.

"What keeps me up at night is time," Mausberg says. "What happens 100 years from now to the landscape that is currently protected to give us clean air and food?"

"What do we do now in order to ensure its longevity?"

The answer, Mausberg added, lies not in the protected countryside itself but the urban area it surrounds. The Greenbelt will always be vulnerable without the support of a strong plan to constrain continuing urban sprawl.

Recognizing the challenge, the province is proposing to toughen its Growth Plan in tandem with its

move to strengthen the Greenbelt.

Municipalities will be required to ensure that 60 per cent of any new development occurs within their established boundaries, up from 40 per cent in the original plan, and to achieve ambitiously high densities on any "greenfield" development.

Achieving those targets will require political changes that most exurban regions are currently unprepared to accept, according to Waterloo's Eby. "We did it; other people can do it. But it takes work," he said.

"Those are difficult numbers for developers and municipalities to swallow," Mausberg admitted. "It does mean you have to build tighter. At the same time, I don't think there's any choice. We can't keep on paving over farmland and natural areas for inefficient sprawl. We know that's not the right way to build our city."

Celebration is well deserved as the Greenbelt enters its second decade. Ontarians have a right to be proud, albeit knowing that access to dates is only prologue for the serious challenges ahead. But now, at least, the way forward — the right way to build our city — is clear.

## Good Natured

Why should we protect and cultivate a great Ontario treasure?

The Ontario Greenbelt is a vital life source. Its 2 million acres address people's basic needs, protect clean air and water, support regional food production and have a massive impact on the provincial economy. Today, more than ever, effective management of our natural capital is needed to ensure it's still with us tomorrow. Here's a glimpse of what's going on in the Greenbelt right now.

Nearly 40% of all Ontario's at-risk species live in the Greenbelt.

The agricultural land of the Ontario Greenbelt contributes more than \$9 billion to the province's economy annually, and provides 161,000 direct and indirect jobs.

The Greenbelt provides \$3.2B annually in ecosystem services to the region's 9 million residents.

8 out of 10 Ontarians support the Growth Plan and 88% want growth directed to built-up areas. (Source: Environics)

The 5,500 farms in the Greenbelt produce enough fruit to supply 25% of apples, 88% of peaches and 85% of grapes consumed in Ontario.

Greenbelt forests remove 25,000,000 pounds of pollutants each year.

The Great Lakes store about 95% of North America's fresh water. That's one-fifth of the world's supply.

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