

## **Growing the Greenbelt**

By Kevin Eby, RPP, contributing editor

One of the more interesting provincial initiatives to manage growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe is expected to play out before the provincial election in the form of expansions to the Greenbelt. While there appears to be little appetite for the wholesale expansions envisioned through the “bluebelt” proposal in 2015, there is currently speculation that the province is considering moving ahead with more modest expansions in several areas experiencing significant growth, including Simcoe County and the Region of Waterloo.

Even these modest proposals, however, have their detractors. Some councillors, while extolling the virtues of protecting natural heritage systems, appear to be opposed to the expansion of the Greenbelt as they feel existing official plan policy frameworks already provide sufficient safeguards against development pressures. In Waterloo, an additional argument is that by expanding the Greenbelt the province would actually weaken existing protection for some natural heritage features originally designated as Environmentally Sensitive Policy Areas over 40 years ago. The affected areas mainly consist of significant meadow/grasslands habitat. These features are protected from aggregate extraction by the regional official plan, but are not similarly protected under the provisions of the Greenbelt Plan, which would prevail in such circumstances. The official plan policies protecting these areas resulted from extensive negotiations with the province and the aggregate industry as part of the approval processes associated with both the 1995 and 2009 regional official plans.

Are there benefits to expanding the Greenbelt?

One argument for expanding the Greenbelt into areas experiencing increased development pressures is that the affected municipalities would no longer be responsible for the significant outlay of resources required every time a challenge is posed to local or regional policies protecting natural heritage systems. The Region of Waterloo spent several million dollars in its almost five-year battle at the Ontario Municipal Board securing the regional equivalent of a greenbelt in the form of Regional Recharge Area, Protected Countryside and Countryside Line designations. Combined, these designations establish not only where future settlement expansions are prohibited, but where future growth should occur. These designations are fundamental to the implementation of the region’s proposed long-term urban structure anchored on a light rail transit system.

While the vast majority of the Regional Recharge Area, Protected Countryside and Countryside Line designations are now in force in Waterloo, they are simply official plan policy, and as a result remain open to challenge through Planning Act processes. This exposure may be mitigated to some extent by anticipated changes to the OMB appeal and Planning Act processes, however, currently, official plan policies governing such areas may be amended through applications filed by the private sector. While there is some protection against private sector submission of amendments specifically proposing settlement area expansions, there is no protection against challenges to the underlying designations that would influence/guide decisions relating to settlement area expansions through future municipal comprehensive review processes. In the absence of provincial level protection for such areas, municipalities are left to potentially re-litigate the same issues over and over again.

What a Greenbelt designation provides is certainty. While proximity to the Greenbelt may somewhat reduce available options for accommodating future growth, the certainty provided by such a designation potentially benefits municipalities, the development industry and the agricultural community alike.

A Greenbelt designation permits municipalities to proceed with planning based on long-term certainty as to where growth will and will not occur. This allows municipalities to focus development, more accurately plan for infrastructure, reduce unnecessary over-sizing to provide for future urban expansions in all directions, thus reduce capital spending and development charge expenditures. In addition, once the threat of challenges to the natural heritage system is eliminated, resources that would otherwise be required to establish and defend such designations can be diverted to other important planning initiatives.

The certainty created by a Greenbelt designation helps inform private sector investment decisions, thereby providing greater certainty in returns on investments made in raw land. Better long-term infrastructure planning can also reduce both up-front costs and development charges, while focused development activity potentially would lead to more timely recovery of front-ending expenditures.

Certainty is also good for the farming community, as a reduction in land speculation keeps farm land prices lower, and allows investments in farm infrastructure and proper soil maintenance programs knowing that such expenditures won't have been wasted in just a couple years.

On the downside, farmers within Greenbelt expansion areas close to urban boundaries lose out on future speculative land value, some existing land speculators will lose out on planned increases in the value of land already purchased, and municipalities, particularly those entirely surrounded by Greenbelt, face reduced options of where and how to grow and, in some cases, less development-related revenues and assessment growth. In some instances, there may be an impact on the cost of housing, however, sufficient land already exists in many municipalities to accommodate growth to 2041 under the targets contained in the Growth Plan, 2017 and can be further mitigated by providing some limited expansion options as appropriate.

On balance, it is my opinion that there is merit to giving serious consideration to expansion of the Greenbelt into areas experiencing significant growth in order to protect natural heritage systems, with two caveats:

1. Existing approved official policies that provide a greater level of protection for the environment than the corresponding policies in the Growth Plan (as in the Region of Waterloo example) should be grandfathered through changes to the Greenbelt Act.
2. In establishing the boundaries of any Greenbelt expansion consideration should be given, where appropriate, to excluding land adjacent to settlement areas to provide some limited opportunity for future expansion similar in concept to the Countryside Line designation in the Region of Waterloo.

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