

DRAFT OP ED

Growing the Greenbelt should be part of the COVID Recovery

The COVID crisis has seen a surge of people spending more time outdoors, often enjoying the beautiful countryside that surrounds our community. We go there because it's safe to meet people, to exercise and because we know being in natural spaces reduces our stress levels. And while we are out and about, we also see all the farmland and farmers busy growing the food we rely on to stay healthy. Put another way, natural spaces and farmland have become very important to maintaining our mental and physical health during COVID.

Of course, these natural spaces and farmland do a lot more for us as well. They provide habitat for plants and animals as well as billions of dollars of natural services we rarely think about but utterly depend on. For example, in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, much of this land provides farmers and residents with a valuable source of water by helping replenish aquifers. Thankfully, much of this land is part of the provincial Greenbelt, which guarantees it remains protected and continues being a source of these precious natural services.

So it's extremely troubling to see that these spaces and the Greenbelt are being attacked. Just before Thanksgiving, a group of Councillors and Mayors in the northern GTA voted to request that the Province open the Greenbelt to sprawl-style employment lands development. As well, we know the Province resurrected old plans to build two new 400-series highways in the northwest GTA (the so-called Highway 413, and Holland Marsh Highway) that would tear through precious farmland and natural areas protected by the Greenbelt.

Some politicians justify this destruction claiming it will create jobs necessary to help get us through the COVID crisis. They're wrong, and misguided. If anything, these sprawl-style developments will cost us more financially, harm our physical and mental health, and impose irreparable harm on rural natural and agricultural areas.

The COVID crisis has taught us how utterly dependent we are on natural areas and farmland for our health and well-being. So, any plans to destroy these protected areas should be immediately thrown out. Rather, governments should be planning to protect more natural lands and farmland by adding them to the Greenbelt. After all, preserving this "natural capital" now will go a long way to help us get through the climate crisis we are now all experiencing.

The good news is that people across the Greater Golden Horseshoe are already working together to protect and expand the Greenbelt. The week after Thanksgiving saw the launch of a new campaign called "My Green and Just Recovery Stops Sprawl and Grows the Greenbelt." Led by the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance - a growing movement, made up of 100+ groups and individuals who want to protect and expand the Greenbelt - the campaign aims to build support for a COVID recovery that stops sprawl and grows the Greenbelt.

The campaign couldn't come at a better time. People need hope in the midst of these unprecedented times and uncertain future. Working towards bringing more of the natural

spaces and farmland we depend on under strong provincial protection is the best way to inject some needed hope that will inspire us to build a sustainable and healthy future.

To learn more, visit www.greenbeltalliance.ca