

Ontario's Greenbelt: Acres of Possibility

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ONTARIO'S GREENBELT TURNS 12 YEARS OLD IN 2017. At two million acres, it's the world's largest peri-urban protected area. The Greenbelt Act and Plan were passed with much fanfare in 2005, and while there was some loud opposition from certain affected landowners and municipalities, the plan received significant backing from conservationists and planning experts. Since its inception, the Greenbelt has enjoyed huge public approval: it is consistently the provincial government's most popular environmental initiative, garnering more than 90% support.

The Greenbelt addressed a growing frustration with land use planning in the Greater Toronto Area: Ontarians asked for better regional planning. They recognized the negative impacts of poor development and the loss of greenspace and farmland.

But the Greenbelt's roots go back longer than the last dozen years—to the mid-1970s, in fact, when Premier Bill Davis protected the Niagara Escarpment. Aside from creating Niagara Falls, the escarpment is known for its rich biodiversity, centuries-old cedar trees, and unique cliff ecology. Declared a UNESCO biosphere reserve, the Niagara Escarpment includes Great Lakes coastlines, woodlands, limestone alvar, oak savannahs, conifer swamps, and other signature features. Together these diverse habitats contain a premier level of species variety among Canadian biosphere reserves, including more than 300 bird species, 55 mammals, 36 reptiles and amphibians, and 90 fish varieties.

In 2001, Ontario's Premier Mike Harris declared the Oak Ridges Moraine protected from development. The premier understood that the moraine is an ecologically important landform, created by receding glaciers during the last ice age. The Oak Ridges Moraine is one of the most significant landforms in southern Ontario, getting its name from the rolling hills and river valleys. The ecologically diverse moraine is the water source for many headwaters streams, and its varied natural resources include woodlands, wetlands, kettle lakes, and bogs. These provide habitats for significant flora and fauna communities to develop and thrive.

The George Wright Forum, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 308–314 (2016).

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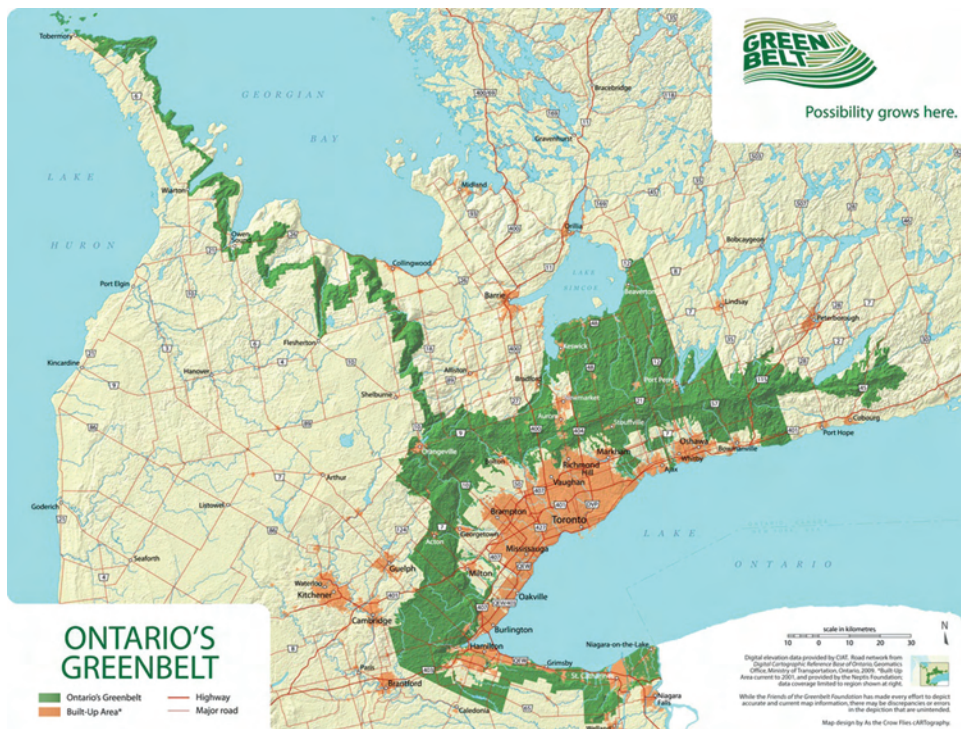


Figure 1. Ontario's Greenbelt—"Possibility Grows Here."

Different land use plans govern each of the three main Greenbelt areas, as they came about in stages over three decades. What makes the overall Greenbelt such a success is that it combines farmland preservation with nature conservation. With over one million acres of farmland, Greenbelt farmers grow and raise a huge variety of food and drink. The Greenbelt's food processing is part of the continent's second largest food hub, all the while also producing award-winning wines and beer.

At the same time, the Greenbelt's natural assets include being home to more than 70 species-at-risk, hundreds of rivers and streams, and thousands of forested acres. It boasts of some of the best ecological diversity just miles from Canada's most populated area. It is not surprising then, that the Greenbelt plans have won several international awards.

Almost a fifth of Canadians live an hour's drive away from the Greenbelt, and forecasts predict a few million more will settle in the Greater Toronto Area over the next decades. This growth pressure is a particularly strong argument for maintaining and even growing the Greenbelt.

Here is why.

Economic powerhouse

The Greenbelt provides significant economic activity. McMaster University Professor

Emeritus Atif Kurbursi calculated that the area enjoys an economic impact of C\$9.1 *billion* every year. This includes the output generated through land-based activities such as farming, tourism, fishing and hunting, and selective logging. With its 161,000 full-time jobs, the Greenbelt provides more employment than the *combined* fisheries, forestry, mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction sectors in Ontario.

All this adds up to a quality of life that is the envy of many. When asked, over 80% of Ontarians say that the Greenbelt is extremely important to them personally. They value the urban–rural link, a vital connection that bonds regardless of different life-styles with an emotional focus on the land. Canadians are invariably linked to the land and the Greenbelt reinforces that deep connection.

Environmental benefits

Due to its protection, Greenbelt lands continue to stay productive, natural, and green: it produces healthy food, cleans our air, and filters our water. It functions as a habitat for wildlife

Figure 2. The Greenbelt delivers significant environmental, economic, and social benefits.



and recharges its vast aquifers and Lake Ontario. And every year the forested areas of the Greenbelt alone have offset the emissions of 27 million cars.

Scientists and economists, in an unusual collaboration, conservatively calculate the ecological services provided by the Greenbelt to be worth C\$3.2 billion every year. This average of C\$1,600 per acre in irreplaceable natural capital is coming mostly from the water filtration services provided by Greenbelt land.

While it is impossible to determine exactly what would have happened without the Greenbelt plans, extrapolating from pre-Greenbelt business-as-usual data shows that the immediate area surrounding the Greater Toronto Area would have lost much of the productivity and ecological services to inefficient sprawl. Without the Greenbelt, the province would have been in a position to lose an estimated 264,000 acres to urban expansion by 2031 (an area twice the size of the City of Toronto).

This form of development would have added to the pressures of car dependency, such as increases in commute times, costs to the taxpayer to build and maintain roads, and traffic accidents, as well as a 41% increase in greenhouse gas emissions, worsening local air quality.

The need for establishing better planning regimes was, and continues to be, a constant concern for protecting and conserving water resources in Canada's fastest-growing region. This is reflected in people's understanding of the benefits of the Greenbelt. Consistently, in public opinion research, the majority of respondents highlighted water protection as the main benefit of the Greenbelt. People are making the link between land and water: protect the land and benefits to water quality will ensue.

Unfortunately, one loophole still exists in the Greenbelt plans: infrastructure projects such as highways and pipelines are permitted to be built in much of the protected area (albeit only after careful scrutiny by the government). While those decisions haven't happened to any meaningful degree, future energy or transportation planning may well drive infrastructure projects.

Recreational treasures

The Greenbelt features the largest network of hiking trails in Canada. That includes the world-famous Bruce Trail, which runs from Niagara Falls all the way to Tobermory, Ontario, where Lake Huron and Georgian Bay meet. At over 725 kilometers long, it follows the Niagara Escarpment, crossing cities, towns, farmland, and conservation areas. Other trails crossing the Greenbelt include the national Trans Canada Trail, the Oak Ridges Trail, and literally hundreds of trails in the dozens of conservation areas and parks.

Recently the Greenbelt *Route* was launched, a 475-kilometer signed cycling route through the countryside, highlighting bike-friendly destinations and thousands of points of interest. Riders can customize their experience to their taste, and nine local cycling loops include complete itineraries curated with the best cycling products from local partners in the various regions.

During winter months, the Greenbelt offers skiing—both down the hill and across the country. Well maintained, those snowy months allow Ontarians to experience the outdoors when the temperature goes below freezing.



Figure 3. A highway sign signals to travelers that they are entering the Greenbelt.

Those that enjoy their outdoors on or in motorized vehicles, while sometimes controversial, can enjoy motorcycle drives in canyons along the Credit River, car tours along the famous Niagara wine route, or snowmobile rides over frozen grounds.

Kite festivals, rib festivals, corn mazes, bird-watching, and many other activities round out the opportunities offered by the Greenbelt's outdoor treasures.

Local food catalyst

The Greenbelt has acted as a catalyst to change the food supply chain. There has been an explosion of interest in local food in southern Ontario. And that makes sense. If we are asking farmers to keep their land in production and not have it developed, shouldn't we eat what they grow and raise? That's exactly what has happened: restaurants and retailers offer more local food, the number of farmers' markets has doubled, public institutions like hospitals and universities are localizing their menus, and local wine sales have doubled in the last five years.

This change from farm to fork continues. Ontario passed a Local Food Act in 2013, municipalities are implementing local food procurement policies, food distributors are selling dedicated local food lines, and food service companies are serving more local. The world's largest food franchise, Subway Sandwiches, recently committed to buying only local tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and onions when in season from Ontario farmers. One wonders: would southern Ontario have been a world leader in the local food switch if it hadn't been for the Greenbelt?

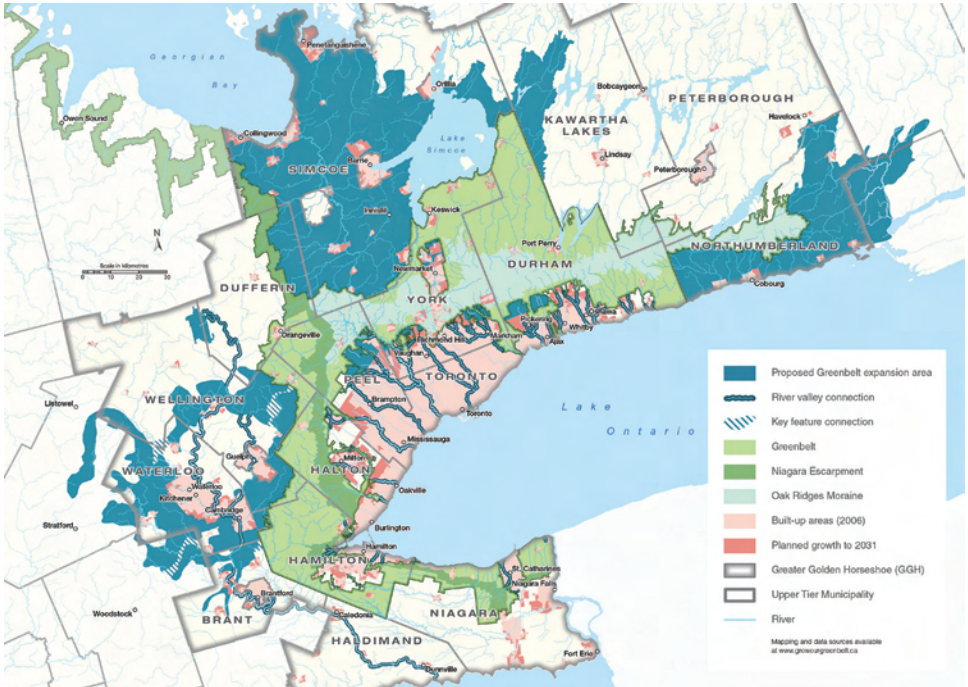


Figure 4. The proposed “Bluebelt” will add 1.5 million acres to the existing Greenbelt.

Future considerations

Last year, the Ontario government undertook the first major review of its regional land use plans. Led by former Toronto Mayor David Crombie, his expert panel recommended building on the success of the past: extending Greenbelt protection along 21 major urban rivers, increasing urban intensification rates, and raising the density requirements of any new greenfield developments. Most importantly, he resisted the pressure by certain developers and municipalities to take land out of the protected Greenbelt to be used for development. Crombie’s work was well received and the government’s proposed amendments are expected to take root in the new year.

In the meantime, environmental and conservation groups are lobbying for growing the Greenbelt by 1.5 million acres. They coined the term “Bluebelt” and developed scientifically rigorous maps outlining the expansion needs. The areas identified as the proposed Bluebelt include threatened headwaters, moraines, groundwater recharge and discharge areas, wetlands, rivers, and streams. The Bluebelt provides over one million people with a clean, safe source of drinking water, and unless we grow smartly and sustainably, the projected four million new residents by 2041 would otherwise place huge pressure on our water resources.

Summary

The Greenbelt has sparked changes in the food system, maintained ecological treasures, while

providing significant economic benefits, jobs and recreational opportunities. The public understands and supports permanently changing our historical development patterns. The Greenbelt is a historical shift. It has acted as an example and inspiration to other jurisdictions and remains a profound statement of hope now and for the future.

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