



# Greenbelt Walks

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An Overview of the Opportunities and Challenges of Major Trails in the Greenbelt

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The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation is committed to promoting awareness and education about Ontario's Greenbelt. To this end we occasionally publish research and general interest papers that explore our three program areas: viable agriculture and viticulture; vibrant rural communities; and, a restored and protected natural environment.

Greenbelt Walks: An Overview of the Opportunities and Challenges of Major Trails in the Greenbelt

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Figure 1 - Ontario Greenbelt.....	2
Figure 2 - Greenbelt Walks Hiking Map.....	4
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Ontario Trails Strategy.....	7
3. Economic Opportunities.....	9
4. Challenges Facing Trails.....	11
4.1 Liability and Capacity.....	11
4.2 Trail Mapping.....	12
4.3 Government Support.....	12
4.4 Trail Costs.....	12
4.5 Trail Funding.....	13
5. Acquisition Options for Trails.....	15
6. Case Studies.....	17
6.1 Hamilton Conservation Authority.....	17
6.2 Trans Canada Trail.....	18
6.3 Bruce Trail.....	18
7. Role of Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation.....	20
Resources.....	22
Endnotes.....	23



# Executive Summary

**T**he Greenbelt Plan recognizes the importance of trails to the quality of life of Ontarians. Trails exist predominately on private lands throughout the Greenbelt and are available for public access by the generous consent of landowners and through the collaborative work of trail groups.

Various groups including volunteer organizations, conservation authorities and government agencies organize the trails, many of which run through the Greenbelt, creating a large network of hiking trails within the protected area.

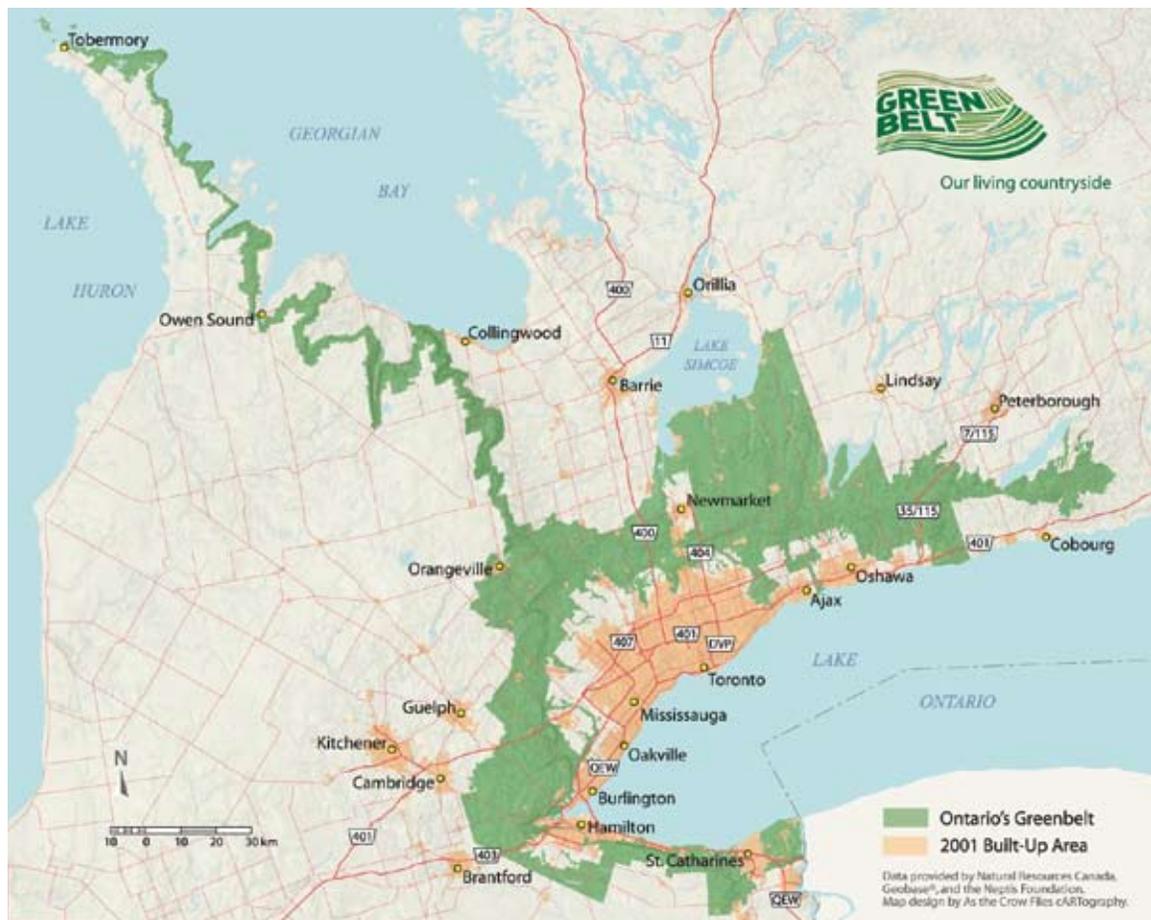
These trails provide visitors with a way to explore and appreciate nature, whether by foot, bike, horse or skis, enhancing their health and their connection with the environment. These trails also have significant importance in terms of recreation, rural development and tourism, especially within the Greenbelt.

The Greenbelt surrounds the province's Golden Horseshoe – the most populated area of Canada, and is vital to the quality of life in southern Ontario. It is an area of permanently protected land spanning 1.8 million acres across southern Ontario. The area stretches from Niagara Falls to Tobermory to Peterborough and encompasses green space, farmland, vibrant communities, forests, wetlands and watersheds.

The Greenbelt was created by legislation in February of 2005. The purpose of the Greenbelt is to protect key environmentally sensitive land and farmland from urban development and sprawl.

The *Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation* began its work in June 2005 as a charitable foundation with a mandate to fund organizations in support of farming, the environment and rural communities located in Ontario's Greenbelt.

**Figure 1 - Ontario Greenbelt**



The recent establishment of the Ontario Trails Strategy (OTS), released in tandem with Active 2010, a comprehensive strategy to increase participation in sport and physical activity throughout Ontario, aims to enhance trails throughout the province. The OTS has worked with various stakeholders to develop strategic directions for the planning, promotion and use of trails in the province. It will work to create much-needed coordination between trail groups, organize trail information to better serve the public, and examine different avenues of trail-related funding, education and safety. A major issue facing trails is the concern over liability and the prohibitive costs of insurance, also focuses of the OTS.

There is a lack of comprehensive mapping for the Ontario trails network. The Ministry of Health Promotion and the Ministry of Natural Resources in cooperation with trail groups are de-

veloping an extensive map over the next few years. In the meantime, the *Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation* has created a large, colourful, user-friendly map outlining trails in the Greenbelt. Figure 1 shows the hiking map, titled “Greenbelt Walks.” The map can be found in LCBO stores across Ontario, online at [www.ourgreenbelt.ca](http://www.ourgreenbelt.ca) or directly through the *Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation* at (416) 960-0001 or [info@ourgreenbelt.ca](mailto:info@ourgreenbelt.ca).

Trail funding and acquisition are both complex issues, varying greatly from area to area. Funding for trails is generally acquired from one of the following sources: government grants, membership fees, license fees in the case of snowmobile trails, fundraising events and grants from individuals, private corporations and foundations. Trail groups are creative fundraisers and are constantly exploring new funding opportunities to keep up with growing costs for maintenance, development and capacity building.

Trail acquisition is accomplished a number of ways: by purchasing the land, by voluntary or “handshake” agreements, through trail easements, through donations of land and by making use of government-owned land. The building and maintenance of trails is often done by volunteers with donated materials, making the estimation of the yearly expenditure of each trail difficult. ‘Hard’ costs for building trails vary by trail type, with planning and design of trails sitting at about 10 per cent of the total hard costs and subsequent maintenance at 5 to 10 per cent of the cost annually.

With the aging population and increasing demand for active recreation, trails will continue to have a promising future. The OTS and mapping project will encourage the coordination of trail groups and other stakeholders. It also promises to bring more users to the trail networks. While the trails that run through the Greenbelt will benefit from these province-wide programs, the onus of maintaining them is on grassroots groups and volunteers.

These trail groups continue to experience capacity issues and require ongoing funding support. Perhaps one of the best opportunities for the *Foundation* involves building awareness of the benefits of trails to encourage trail use, which may in turn result in an increase in sustainable funding and accommodation.

All information in this report was derived from research and interviews with trail groups and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the staff of the *Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation*. The report is intended to provide us with a sense of the current challenges and opportunities for trails in the Greenbelt.

Figure 2 - Greenbelt Walks Hiking Map



# Introduction

**O**ntario has over 64,000 kilometres of trails that accommodate a variety of usages: foot-paths with natural surfaces, multi-use tracks with manufactured surfaces, former rail lines, portage routes, on-road bicycle routes and more.<sup>1</sup> Many foot trails pass through the Greenbelt, allowing its residents and visitors to access and explore the living and working countryside that surrounds them. Trails are becoming important elements of society, leading to better health, a strong economy, tight-knit communities, and a sense of the importance of conserving and cherishing the environment.

Trails are used for a variety of authorized and unauthorized activities such as:

- walking
- cycling
- hiking
- snowmobiling
- bird watching

- dogsledding
- ATV's
- horseback riding

Hike Ontario's database lists 25 hiking clubs with 13,000 members. The most widely known hiking trail, the Bruce Trail has over 8,400 members and estimates that it attracts almost 400,000 people each year. The Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs supports 248 community-based snowmobile clubs and thousands of volunteers who groom and maintain the 41,290 kilometres of snowmobile trails in Ontario.<sup>2</sup> Volunteer groups build, manage and maintain trails. There are few trail associations headed by a paid Executive Director, such as the Bruce Trail and the Oak Ridges Trail. Governments also become involved in maintaining trails on their land, as many municipalities will contract equipment and materials for upkeep.

There are four times as many trails in Ontario as there are roads.<sup>3</sup> According to Patrick Conner, Executive Director of the Ontario Trails Council, the Ontario section of the Trans Canada Trail (TCT) alone will garner up to \$2 billion when fully completed, while snowmobile trails show revenue of at least \$1.2 billion into the local economy each year.<sup>4</sup> These values put into perspective the importance of trails to the economy, as well as the number of citizens who choose to make use of the multitude of benefits trails offer.

# 2

## Ontario Trails Strategy

**T**he Greenbelt Plan encourages the province of Ontario in partnership with municipalities, conservation authorities and trails groups to develop publicly accessible trails, a trail plan and a coordinated approach to trail planning and development. The government has started this process through the Ontario Trails Strategy released in 2005.

The strategy supports a movement to see Ontarians more active and healthier by 2010. According to Jim Watson, the Minister of Health Promotion, “The Ontario Trails Strategy is a long-term plan that establishes strategic directions for planning, managing, promoting and using trails in Ontario.”<sup>5</sup>

The strategy developed in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders, including government, businesses and not-for-profit organizations, supports continued cooperation among government levels, not-for-profit and private sectors who are working towards a shared vision for Ontario trails.

Initiated in July of 2003, the plan includes many stakeholders, such as trail and environmental groups, representatives from the tourism industry and Aboriginal communities. This movement towards encouraging regular usage of the trails to benefit Ontarians’ health, is due in part to studies

included in Active 2010, which show that 52 per cent of Ontarians are insufficiently active.<sup>6</sup>

The Strategy addresses some of the challenges facing trails, pinpointing the need for:

- coordination of trail groups
- accessing information on trails in a ‘one window’ approach
- acknowledging the prohibitive costs of liability insurance
- addressing the lack of funding and land resources
- outlining the need for education
- identifying the need for improved trail safety.<sup>7</sup>

As the trail strategy is implemented, it is anticipated that the capacity to deal with some of the identified challenges will increase.

# 3

## Economic Opportunities

**T**rails offer economic opportunities to urban and rural communities. Studies conducted in the U.S. found that trails stimulate tourism and recreation related spending, acting as an impetus for kick-starting a stagnating rural economy. The Bruce Trail averages 400,000 users per year, 70 per cent of whom buy goods during their visit within 10 kilometres of the trail. At the local municipal level, trails and green space cost the municipality little to operate compared to developed land. Studies compiled by the Evergreen Foundation show increases in property values of up to 20 per cent for lands adjacent to trails, translating into increased tax revenue for municipalities.<sup>8</sup> This information suggests trails present opportunities to drive community revitalization throughout rural communities in the Greenbelt. Uxbridge and Caledon are two Greenbelt municipalities that have successfully adopted trails as part of their community revitalization strategy.



The Bruce Trail is one of the Greenbelt's most popular trails. It averages 400,000 users per year, 70 per cent of whom buy goods during their visit within 10 kilometres of the trail.

Hikers enjoy the clean air and the beautiful habitat while exploring the trail.

# 4

## Challenges Facing Trails

### **4** .1 Liability and Capacity

Liability and insurance are the largest concerns for the organizations that care for trails. Providing adequate safety and the costs of liability insurance are viewed as threats to future trail developments. According to the Ontario Trails Strategy, there appears to be a major disconnect between trails and other recreational areas creating safety concerns. Facilities such as skating rinks are not expected to make both hockey players and figure skaters practice at the same time, while horseback riders, hikers and cyclists are sometimes expected to enjoy the same trails.<sup>9</sup> Though some multi-use trails attempt to integrate all activities into one, it is difficult for people enjoying non-motorized activities and those in vehicles to use the same trail safely thereby increasing the possibilities for accidents.

The lack of designated trails for ATV's and bicycles leads drivers to use hiking trails, creating a liability for the trail groups and is potential risk to both the drivers and others using the trail, as well as being extremely detrimental to the environment and damaging to the hiking trails. Various trail groups have implemented barriers and information programs in an effort to keep these users off

hiking trails but to date the problems still exist.

Trails are becoming increasingly popular putting pressure on the capacity of trails and trail infrastructure such as parking areas. Overall, trails have not had ample financial support to properly accommodate the increased costs of insurance, infrastructure and education programs needed as a result of escalating and diverse trail use.

## **4.2 Trail Mapping**

The government is currently developing a comprehensive Ontario trail map. However, the estimated 64,000 kilometres of trails within the province does not include small municipal trails, an omission that hinders the development of a cohesive, province-wide trail network, as some of these smaller trails could act as connections between sections of major trails. If included on an Ontario-wide map of trails, the economic benefits for these smaller trails would also increase as well as their visibility and their use.

Given the lack of comprehensive trail mapping within Ontario, the Ministry of Natural Resources is working with the Ministry of Health Promotion on a mapping project that aims to map all of Ontario's trails over the next five year period.

## **4.3 Governmental Support**

According to Patrick Connor of the Ontario Trails Council, a major issue facing Ontario's trails is a long-standing lack of governmental support for building and maintaining the trail network. After the relatively recent shifting of responsibility from provincial hands to the municipalities, trails and recreation were put in competition with homes for the elderly and mental health initiatives<sup>10</sup>, often leaving them without adequate support. Connor suggests that this problem is gradually being rectified, but there is still a marked lack of organization between levels of government and the volunteer organizations who have long taken care of the trails.<sup>11</sup> Connor believes that legislation is required to solidify trail support, and that trails should be seen as alternative transportation corridors throughout the province, connecting our rural communities.

These concerns form important conclusions regarding the future of trails in Ontario. There is an identified need to develop a strong network to provide consistent programs and management for trails. Along with this, it is also important for these groups to continue to cooperate and work on finding best practices together.<sup>12</sup> A first step towards such a network has been made by the Ontario Trails Strategy, which acknowledges the challenges facing the trail community.

## **4.4 Trail Costs**

Along with the hard costs for building a trail come regular maintenance operations such as re-painting blazes, ensuring the trails are useable, and trimming back edges to ensure a clear path. The chart below outlines the hard costs in 2004 for building eleven popular types of trails, taking into account the construction of the trail itself along with associated amenities such as surfacing, signage and ecological landscape restoration.

**Trail Types and Subsequent ‘Hard’ Costs\* for the Trans Canada Trail**

Trail Type	Est. Cost (per km)
Rail Trail: 4.5m wide asphalt	\$254,350
Rail Trail: 3.5m wide asphalt	\$144,600
Rail Trail: 3.5m wide granular	\$107,100
Hydro Corridor: 3.5m wide asphalt	\$168,100
Hydro Corridor: 3.5m wide granular	\$115,600
Off-Road Trail: 3.0m wide asphalt	\$178,600
Off-Road Trail: 3.0m wide granular	\$133,600
On-road/Paved Shoulder: 2.5m wide ea. Side (no widening required)	\$188,100
On-road/Paved Shoulder: 2.5m wide ea. Side (widening required)	\$215,800
Bike Lane/On Road: 1.5m wide ea. Side	\$84,300
Hiking Trail: 1.5m wide cleared right-of-way	\$22,800

\*All cost estimates based on the Economic Impact of the Trans Canada Trail in Ontario report by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2004).

The above costs were based on projects throughout Ontario, which involved similar work in terms of landscape and trail construction, then averaged over the entire province to account for specific site issues, geographic location and local market values for materials.<sup>13</sup> These costs, however, are not typical of what each organization would pay, since most trail construction projects receive some kind of in-kind support to reduce the expenses, including donated materials and volunteer labour.

Not listed in the chart are ‘soft costs,’ which take into account the planning and design of the trails and are estimated as standing at about 10 per cent of the hard cost of construction. Annual maintenance can be extrapolated from the above values as well, estimated as being around 5 to 10 per cent of hard construction costs.<sup>13</sup> Volunteer workers also incur a small expense, as they require insurance, equipment and food.

**4.5 Trail Funding**

Patrick Connor states that the funding of trails is a “complex exercise,” being planned and operated

through a myriad of organizations. Government funding is one such venue, as the federal government has recently granted the Trans Canada Trail \$15 million towards trail construction and related activities. The Trans Canada Trail is an example of a non-government managed trail, with each section run by a local community group, nurturing “a profound sense of local ownership, control and pride.”<sup>14</sup> The TCT also runs a program where members of the public can sponsor or ‘adopt’ sections of the trail. Private corporations and foundations can give grants to trails, while in-kind donations can also help allay some of the costs. Membership fees are also an important source of income for some trails. Snowmobile and ATV permits stand as the number one funding avenue for the many vehicle-specialized trails. As with most volunteer-run trail organizations, the Oak Ridges Trail Association is largely funded through membership fees and donations from foundations and individuals.



Some trails, like the Trans Canada Trail, run programs where members of the public can sponsor or ‘adopt’ sections of the trail.

It is important for trails to produce a certain level of income for maintenance and to create the best environment possible for users.

# 5

## Acquisition Options for Trails

**T**here are a number of ways land is accessed for trail use, each with its own benefits and barriers. Land may be purchased by organizations, or government-owned by various levels (municipal, provincial and federal), or used with permission of the private landowner through a conservation easement, trail easement or handshake agreement. Conservation Authorities, such as the Hamilton Conservation Authority, purchase land to allow access to their public lands. If the landowner is willing, trail easements can be attained through the Ontario Heritage Trust. Voluntary or ‘handshake’ agreements are popular, as private landowners give local trail organizations permission to have the trails cross their land. The Oak Ridges Trail Association works with the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust and local and regional governments to access land for trails using handshake agreements, conservation easements and in the purchasing of land to protect the trail the Bruce Trail Association also acquires land through these means.



With more than 64,000 kilometres in trails within Ontario, the amount of activities that trails can accommodate is quite large.

Usage includes paths with natural surfaces, multi-use tracks with manufactured surfaces, former rail lines, portage routes, on-road bicycle routes and more.

# 6

## Case Studies

### **6.1 Hamilton Conservation Authority**

The Hamilton Conservation Authority (HCA) has 160 kilometres of trails in the Hamilton area, ranging from 1 kilometre strolls to 40 kilometre hikes. The most common trail type used is the limestone screening trail at 2.5-3metres wide, this type of trail is often used in rail trail routes. The existing stone from the rail bed gives the limestone screening a good base.

Unlike non-governmental organizations, Conservation Authorities often have access to land, staff and funding for trail development and maintenance. For example, the HCA has bought most of the land the trails run through, even buying land outside their area of jurisdiction to ensure connections between trail systems. They work in cooperation with the Bruce Trail Association to augment the networking between trails in the area. Each section of the trail is managed by the area it runs through and each area gets a certain budget for maintenance based on the length of the trail section they manage. For example Dundas Valley, the longest section of trail, has a budget of about \$50,000-60,000 per year.

## 6.2 Trans Canada Trail

The Trans Canada Trail (TCT) has 1,900 kilometres of trail within Ontario, many running through the Greenbelt. There is an additional 500 kilometres still to be built. These are sections that have yet to be developed for a number of reasons, including lack of funding, remote locations and difficult terrain.<sup>15</sup> The TCT recently received a \$15 million grant from the federal government to go towards trail construction and related activities. It also relies on donations from the public.<sup>16</sup> The TCT is currently run by a dedicated volunteer base who perform much of the labour necessary to keep the trail running.

Dan Andrews, General Manager of Trans Canada Trail Ontario, has one main improvement he would like to see regarding the organization of the TCT within Ontario. Though each region's volunteers have long kept the trail running smoothly, Andrews would like to hire a series of Regional Trail Coordinators for each area to act as ambassadors for their own section of the trail and know in intimate detail the issues and priorities specific to that section. Taking on such tasks as organizing fundraising, maintenance and human resources, a paid employee would be able to work regular office hours, unlike volunteers who tend to be free only on evenings and weekends. In Andrews' vision, a group of Regional Trail Coordinators could work together, each using their specific knowledge to form a powerful network between Ontario's sections of the TCT, delivering best practices and operating the TCT as an efficient whole.

## 6.3 The Bruce Trail

The Bruce Trail is the oldest and longest footpath in Canada, measuring 845 kilometres in length and running along much of the Niagara Escarpment. It has the distinction of being located entirely within a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, one of only 14 such protected areas in all of Canada, proclaiming the Niagara Escarpment as a unique and environmentally fragile area.

The trail is operated by an umbrella organization called the Bruce Trail Association, who provides membership and coordinates the land securement, land stewardship, marketing, and fundraising programs. The primary focus of the Association is securing a conservation corridor along the Niagara Escarpment. The Bruce Trail was established as a way to provide access to the escarpment and build public awareness.

The Bruce Trail has nine sections. Each section has a corresponding club responsible for trail development and maintenance, runs the hiking programs, arranges volunteer activities in support of the club and hosts trail events. The trail is largely a dirt footpath, except in places where the landowner wants it to be otherwise. For instance, in some of the conservation areas through which the trail crosses, the trail is gravel as the conservation authorities wish to make it more accessible to people of all abilities. As a general rule, however, the trails are low-impact dirt footpaths. Of the 845 kilometres, 186 kilometres is along the side of roads. The Bruce Trail Association has been unable to obtain landowner permission to cross private land in those locations.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Bruce Trail Association it is not possible to give specific numerical figures defining the cost of building or maintaining the trails annually since much of the work is done by volunteers using donated supplies. In the last fiscal year trail workers put in over 10,000 hours, giving a sense of the intensity of their commitment.<sup>18</sup> The Trail Development and Maintenance Committee budget is about \$15,000 per year, which is spent on various projects.<sup>19</sup> Each club also receives a cer-

tain amount of the yearly membership fees received by the Bruce Trail Association, allowing them to further maintain their sections of trail, run their club hiking programs, prepare their newsletters and more.<sup>20</sup>

Very little of the trail has been secured through conservation easements. Though these easements would be less expensive for the Association, Beth Kummling Executive Director of the Bruce Trail Association, says that easements seem to be unpopular with landowners, since they result in little financial return and are procedurally complex to arrange. In lieu of easements, the Association purchases land, spending about \$1 million each year to obtain property that lies in a conservation corridor along the trail. As a result of this, the Bruce Trail Association estimates it needs about \$50 million to purchase the land necessary to secure a conservation corridor along the entire length of the Bruce Trail.<sup>21</sup> There is currently an annual target to raise about \$2 million in donations of cash and land, as well as grants from the government and other organizations.

An economic study completed over 10 years ago indicated that 400,000 visits are made to the trail each year, although only 8,400 are members of the Bruce Trail Association.<sup>22</sup> To attract users to the trail there are a number of hiking programs open to both members and non-members. The Bruce Trail is advertised via signs that indicate the presence of the trail group, posted regularly along its entire length. On the annual 'Bruce Trail Day' the public is invited to come out and experience the trail.

# 7

## Role of Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation

**T**his report has outlined some of the challenges and opportunities facing trails in the Greenbelt. There are many aspects to consider in reviewing our potential role in funding trails projects such as the timelines of projects and the significant number of trail groups. For instance, the length of our mandate limits our effectiveness in funding any long-term venture such as creating a Greenbelt Trail.

One possible use of funding is developing key benchmarking data. At this time, there is a gap in the availability of data such as the number of annual trail users and total number of trails in the Greenbelt. Up to date surveys of users will assist trail groups in marketing and fundraising by providing needed information on trail usage and demographics.

Trails offer economic development opportunities for rural communities, yet few municipalities are promoting trails or encouraging connecting trails to their rural towns and villages. A trail promotion campaign communicating the economic benefits of trails to municipalities offers another potential funding opportunity. One way of promoting trails, which the *Foundation* has taken upon itself, is the creation of the Greenbelt Walks hiking trails map. The map provides a clear outline of the three main trails in the Greenbelt, the Bruce Trail, Trans Canada Trail and the Oak Ridges Trail

as well as one historical trail, the Toronto Carrying Place Trail. More than 1 million maps have been printed and distributed in LCBO's across the province. For more information on the map, contact the *Foundation* at [info@ourgreenbelt.ca](mailto:info@ourgreenbelt.ca), (416) 960-0001 or check out their website at [www.ourgreenbelt.ca](http://www.ourgreenbelt.ca).

Perhaps one of the most likely opportunities for grant making by the *Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation* is the promotion and marketing of the existing trails. For example, a grant provided to AgCare in June 2006, funds a sign program to inform trail users of the importance of the local farms backing onto trail lands. The *Foundation* should continue to reach out to trail groups in the Greenbelt and offer grant opportunities that promote and build awareness of the recreational, tourism and economic benefits of trails throughout our living countryside.



Although trails offer economic development opportunities for rural communities, there is a need for more municipalities to help promote trails and encourage connecting trails to their rural towns and villages.

# Resources



## **Documents**

Economic Impact of the Trans Canada Trail in Ontario. PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Tourism Advisory Services, 2004.

Ontario Trails Strategy. Ministry of Health Promotion. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2005.

Trail Report. Trans Canada Trail, 2005.

## **Websites**

Bruce Trail Association: <http://www.brucetrail.org>

Conservation Hamilton: <http://www.hamrca.on.ca/>

Oak Ridges Trail Association: <http://www.oakridgestrail.org>

Ontario Trails Council: <http://www.ontariotrails.on.ca>

Ontario Trail Strategy: <http://www.mhp.gov.on.ca/english/sportandrec/trails.asp>

Trans Canada Trail: <http://www.tctrail.ca>

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Ontario Trails Strategy. Ministry of Health Promotion. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Ontario Trails Strategy. Ministry of Health Promotion. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Patrick Connor, Executive Director, Ontario Trails Council – Phone Interview August 2006.

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<sup>8</sup>The Nature of Cities, Alberta: An Evergreen Workshop on urban green space protection and restoration. Evergreen, 2006.

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<sup>10</sup>Patrick Connor, Executive Director, Ontario Trails Council – Phone Interview August 2006.

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<sup>14</sup>Trail Report. Trans Canada Trail, 2005.

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<sup>17</sup>Beth Kummling, Executive Director, Bruce Trail Association – E-mail Interview August 2006.

<sup>18</sup>Beth Kummling, Executive Director, Bruce Trail Association – E-mail Interview August 2006.

<sup>19</sup>Beth Kummling, Executive Director, Bruce Trail Association – E-mail Interview August 2006.

<sup>20</sup>Beth Kummling, Executive Director, Bruce Trail Association – E-mail Interview August 2006.

<sup>21</sup>Beth Kummling, Executive Director, Bruce Trail Association – E-mail Interview August 2006.

<sup>22</sup>Beth Kummling, Executive Director, Bruce Trail Association – E-mail Interview August 2006.