

Urban sprawl

Resurrecting the suburban dream means controlling population explosion, managing health risk and developing livable, connected communities where residents don't rely on oil to get to their jobs

The home stretch

Linda White works at a non-profit organization in Toronto helping others build healthy, inclusive communities in Ontario.

At the end of her workday, the 46-year-old mother of two teens endures an egregiously slow 35-km drive eastward on Highway 401. And then while preparing dinner at her house in Whitby, she watches the steady stream of traffic pass by, as commuters make their way home to the numerous suburbs that envelop Durham Region.

Her husband teaches at a local school, which allows him to enjoy the best aspects of living in a small town, without paying the penalty of a long commute.

For many, though, "it's not about the dream of being in a rural community and bumping into your neighbours at the grocery store," White says. "It's not like that at all. People are working till really late. Then they are chauffeuring their kids around on the weekends."

White is among a growing number of Ontarians who are realizing that the population explosion of recent years—the Golden Horseshoe area is the fastest-growing region in Canada—is contributing to an urban sprawl that negatively impacts on the quality of our lives.

The key to making existing suburban communities work, she says, is smart growth and planning to ensure that local employment and services develop, along with the housing to create connected, livable communities, rather than simply bedroom communities of Toronto-bound commuters.

If she and more of her neighbours could work locally, as her husband does, commuter gridlock—and the greenhouse gas emissions produced by the traffic—would be substantially reduced.

In fact, the intensification of existing urban areas, rather than simply the scattering of more low-density suburban housing further and further afield, is exactly what the Ontario government prescribes in its Greenbelt Plan and Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

The Greenbelt, which stipulates land where urban growth cannot take place, provides a solution to contain urban sprawl—the extent to which the conversion of farm and rural land to other uses exceeds the rate of population growth, says Mark Winfield, an environment professor at York University.

"There are good reasons to expand the Greenbelt area," he says, adding that the government's recently announced proposed amendments to allow municipalities to request further expansion of their neighbouring Greenbelt lands into lands not yet zoned for development are "fundamentally the right idea."

If the Greenbelt area were larger, he explains, it would be more effective at preventing the "leap-



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Linda White, above, with her teenagers, says living in Whitby and working in Toronto is "not the dream of being in a rural community." People tend to work late, she says, and then they are "chauffeuring kids around on the weekends."

frogging" of development to the opposite side of designated land, as has happened in the Simcoe area.

According to the Neptis Foundation, a non-profit group that provides non-partisan research into smart urban growth, another 260,000 rural acres will be urbanized by 2031—an area almost double the size of Toronto—if development in Ontario continues at the current pace. And, Neptis warns, if our car dependence continues, over the next 27 years, commuting times will rise by 300 per cent and carbon dioxide emissions by 42 per cent.

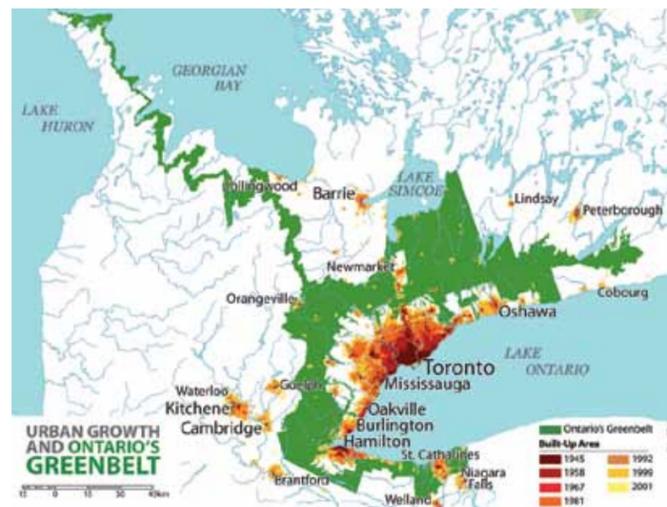
Meanwhile, urban sprawl and our over-reliance on the automobile take much of the blame for the growing problem of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, stress and even depression, according to a landmark report by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO). The statistics are staggering: in Canada, obesity rates for children ages 2 to 17 have almost tripled during the past 25 years, to hit 26 per cent.

"This car dependency is a killer," says Dr. Riina Bray, a family physi-

cian and one of the CPSO report's authors, who herself moved with her family in June from Toronto to King City.

In fact, muses Dr. Bray, there should be an OHIP billing code for sprawl-related illness, "to see what the cost really is."

Since 1967, there was an almost 300 per cent increase in developed land in the GTA. At this rate, another area almost double the size of Toronto may be urbanized by 2031.



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Environics Poll

Green is gold

In spite of the economic downturn, Ontarians see the value of the Greenbelt

Nine out of 10 Ontarians have identified the province's Greenbelt, as important to the future well-being of Ontario, according to a recent poll by the Toronto-based marketing research group Environics.

"What we find, over and over again, is that the public cares about the Greenbelt," says Burkhard Mausberg, president of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation. "They see it as a visionary piece of legislation that is important to our children's future." After all, he points out, "We don't make more land."

Largest in the world

The Ontario Greenbelt—1.8 million acres (728,000 hectares) of protected green space surrounding the Greater Golden Horseshoe—is the largest in the world.

Hosting some 7,000 farms that produce about \$3,487 per acre, it could just as well be called the "Foodbelt," notes Mausberg, as it contributes more than \$4 billion annually in agriculture and food production alone. Meanwhile, its non-market benefits, such as water purification through aquifers (natural layers of water-bearing permeable rock) rather than municipal sewage treatment plants, are worth at least \$2.6 billion a year, according to a 2008 David Suzuki Foundation report, sponsored by the Greenbelt Foundation.

Economic contribution

York University environment professor Mark Winfield agrees that the Greenbelt contributes significantly to Ontario's economy. "There is the direct economic value of tourism. [And] living within the Greenbelt makes the Golden Horseshoe a more attractive place, which is important in terms of the economic evolution of the province."

The results of the annual Environics poll, released three weeks ago, also indicate growing public support for increasing the amount of Greenbelt land, with 8 out of 10 people in favour of designating more land to the Greenbelt.

Mausberg reports that many countries are envious of Ontario's Greenbelt. "Ours has the greatest legislative protection." In some countries, land previously designated as Greenbelt are being taken back for development, he says, "piece by piece, like Swiss cheese."

At a time when Canada's record on the environment is not great, it's heartening, says Mausberg, that Ontario has a Greenbelt that is clearly "world-leading."

Ontario's local food champions

Growing up green

Children in city daycare tend their own garden

In the past, when children attending the Danforth Child Care Centre in Toronto were asked where carrots come from, they used to answer, "From my plate."

Now, they help tend an on-site garden planted with carrots, beets, tomatoes, strawberries and herbs. "We take the water can and pour water on [the plants]," says Asheya, 4. "They grow and then we eat them up."

These children may live in the city centre, but they are well-fed leaders-in-training in the growing local food movement and some of the first to benefit from a nutritious educational pilot program

designed to ensure that while they're at daycare, eventually a large percentage of the food on their plates is produced in Ontario.

According to Lorraine Bellisle, dietary supervisor of Municipal Child Care Services, about 42 per cent of the food fed to 2,850 children in the city's daycares is procured in Ontario.

Previously, about 20 per cent of the department's \$2.2 million food budget was allotted to Ontario groceries.

It began in 2009 with the City of Toronto's 35 childcare centres that serve lunch and snacks cooked on-site; and later, 22 other daycare



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Much of the food that is served to children at the Danforth Child Care Centre is locally grown, some at its on-site city garden.

centres that served catered food. The pilot is among the first to qualify for funding from the new Broader Public Sector Investment Fund, a program run by the Greenbelt Fund to promote local food.

Daycare supervisor Elena Huma

says some children have been so inspired by the garden that they have started gardens at home, with their parents' help.

Visit ontariofresh.ca to learn more about the Greenbelt Fund and its local food initiatives.

The Greenbelt: at our service

Valued at \$2.6 billion, the numerous eco-services provided by the Ontario Greenbelt include:

- waste treatment and water filtration via natural aquifers
- flood control
- climate stabilization through carbon storage
- wildlife-habitat preservation
- clean air.

Source: *Ontario's Wealth, Canada's Future: Appreciating the Value of the Greenbelt's Eco-Services*, David Suzuki Foundation, 2008.

Go to greenbelt.ca to read the complete Environics Poll.

This is the first in a special information series about the Ontario Greenbelt. Look for the next one on Wednesday, January 19, 2011.

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