

> BLUEBELT

Divining the real value of Ontario's water

Future of Bluebelt hinges on stewardship

DICK SNYDER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Sometime this summer, the provincial cabinet will make a decision that will carve out the future course of Ontario's so-called Bluebelt.

Consider "the blue" to be the kid brother of the Greenbelt, that (almost) two-million-acre swath of farmland and green space protected by provincial legislation since 2005.

The Greenbelt anchors the agricultural, tourism and recreation industries in Ontario to the tune of \$91 billion per year in overall economic impact and 161,000 full-time jobs. Eco-services such as water filtration, flood control and recreational opportunities account for \$3.2 billion of activity.

The proposed new Bluebelt covers the vast water resources made up of moraines, aquifers, headwaters, urban river valleys, lakes and wetlands scattered across the Greater Golden Horseshoe (and a little beyond).

Nine out of 10 Ontarians support an expanded Greenbelt in order to protect water, farmland and Ontario's natural heritage from development sprawl. There are some areas of the province — such as inland communities like Waterloo, Guelph-Wellington and Simcoe County — that rely on groundwater. This is a precious limited resource. Yet these areas are outside the realm of Greenbelt protection or, indeed, any provincial legislation.

"Waterloo Region is particularly vulnerable because we are the largest community in North America dependent on ground water," says Kevin Thomason of Smart Growth Waterloo. "We don't have a big pipe to the Great Lakes, we don't have mountain streams running down into our community. We have solely our water wells."

Say proponents of the original Greenbelt legislation set 12 years ago: It's time to focus on water. Or rather, it's time to focus on our stewardship of a precious resource that has been taken for granted. This will set the framework for how some of the province's water resources will be managed and protected for years to come — if all goes according to plan.

Water plays a significant part in some of the 87 recommendations former Toronto mayor David Crombie submitted to the provincial government after completing a mandated review of the Greenbelt legislation and related land-use planning slated to take place at the Greenbelt's 10-year mark.

As chair of the Coordinated Land



Webster Falls near Hamilton, Ont. The proposed new Bluebelt covers the vast water resources scattered across the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Use Planning Review Advisory Panel, Crombie and his team toured the province in 2014 and 2015, seeking stakeholder and public input to help shape future policy. The panel's recommendations seek to unite the objectives set out in the legislated plans for the Greenbelt, the provincial Growth Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment.

"I'm optimistic — but people tell me I'm chronically cheerful," said the 80-year-old former Toronto mayor in an interview. "It is a historic opportunity for the government to begin implementing one of the largest and most significant regional planning set of recommendations in North America."

Public perceptions of water are changing, Crombie says, partly driven by an awareness of climate change and conditions in less water-rich parts of the world.

"We sit on 21 per cent of the world's fresh water. No one else has the Great Lakes like we do, and therefore the river valleys that flow into it."

"We took it for granted that it's there and always would be. So using it as a sewer is no problem, paving it over is no problem, all in the name of progress. But now there's a rebirth in the understanding of the importance

of water. So boy, we better remember it won't be there forever and we've got to treat it with a little more care."

Crombie has had his hands wet for a long while. In 1988, he was commissioner of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, which grew out of public dismay over waterside development on federal lands. This led to the opening of the 350-kilometre Waterfront Trail in 1995, connecting parks, wildlife habitats and recreation areas from Stoney Creek to Trenton.

"Today the trail covers more than 1,600 kilometres spanning from Lake Erie east into Quebec, with further expansion planned for Lake Huron and Northumberland County."

"Wherever we go, people understand that the trail is a vehicle by which you attract attention to the quality of the water and the quality of its relationship to the land."

But it's taken some work to get there.

"Now there's a clear understanding that good ecology is a producer of wealth," Crombie says. "That's the fact of it. A wetland sits there and it cleans water — it's not a stagnant thing."

Debbe Crandall has been involved with efforts to protect the Oak Rid-

ges Moraine since 1990, back when "it was pretty much the Wild West." There was no legislation to protect watercourses from being paved over or filled-in in the name of economic development.

"If you were to look at a map (of areas of the Greater Golden Horseshoe) pre-1980s, and then look at the same map today, you would notice that the landscape has become simplified," she says. "All these little headwater tributaries are gone. They've been plowed over or drained. They've been paved."

There was no unifying legislation to guide the myriad regions and municipalities that touched on the moraine. More significantly, there was a lack of understanding of the science, geography and hydrology at play.

"Because each municipality didn't have a sense of the 'whole' — and how important that little bubbly thing, which may seem so small at one spot, how they all join together to create these river systems."

Crandall calls the Oak Ridges Moraine — which spans 24 municipalities and 160 km — "a perfect rain barrel" because it's lined with silty glacial soils that act as a massive bucket. Even when all else is dry, the moraine produces teeming riv-

ers of water.

But it was not always understood — or appreciated — as such. Today, the science has caught up, thanks to decades of work by such groups as STORM (Save the Oak Ridges Moraine), Ontario Nature, Eco Spark, Environmental Defense, Earthroots and the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance — just to name a few of the dozens of grassroots organizations advocating for water protection in the province.

On May 17, 2001, the Oak Ridges Moraine Protection Act was passed. Earth Day 2017 marks 15 years since the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act was approved as a regulation under the new legislation.

Crandall points to work that still needs to be done. Unfettered permits to take water — as revealed last year during the public outcry over Nestlé's 3.6 million-litre-a-day allotment at its Aherfoyle site — are a particular sore point that Crandall would like to see rectified.

"We have to find ways to build communities, respect the ecology and be helpful to the economy," Crombie says. "The old way that separated those three things is no longer not just good thinking, it is no longer a part of making us a productive, healthy and sustainable place."

> NATURAL CAPITAL

Adding up money hidden in ecosystem

Study tallies economics of natural resources

DICK SNYDER
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In many people's minds, protecting ecology and boosting the economy are at odds. But a relatively new school of economic thinking helps put a price on "natural capital" in a manner designed to help planners evaluate natural resources in a holistic and very practical sense.

"This is not simply dealing with the ecological in the abstract," says former Toronto mayor David Crombie. "The core understanding is that economy, ecology and community are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are mutually interdependent. So it's fundamental to people that

they have an economy that they can participate in and one that they can get enough wealth out of so that they can raise their families."

A report released by the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation late last year entitled "Ontario's Good Fortune: Appreciating the Greenbelt's Natural Capital" employed the National Ecosystem Services Classification methodology to identify ecosystem services "accounts" that directly benefit citizens.

For example, such activities and benefits as hunting and bird watching, flood protection, water filtration by wetlands and carbon storage resulting in clean air to breathe — all have a very real economic benefit to those living in proximity to the Greenbelt.

The report was prepared by Green



The Waterloo moraine. Waterloo Region is the largest North American community that relies on ground water.

Analytics, an Ontario accounting firm with the catchy and very forward-thinking tag line "people, planet, profit."

The value of recreational activities in the Greenbelt is calculated at \$21 billion a year. Flood protection of private property is valued at \$224 million per year, with our natural environment providing \$52 million

per year of value in carbon sequestration.

"There's a terrific economy in agriculture," Crombie says. "Sprawl is no longer a winning proposition, if it ever was. It's not helpful to the building of community unless you like hour and a half commutes. The idea of having complete communities where people can live, work and play

is more helpful. It's a better way of dealing with it."

The goal of valuing natural capital is to provide guidance for land-use planning that takes into account a wider set of benefits and consequences for developmental policies, including quality of life, economic growth and the preservation and enhancement of natural resources.



“On Earth Day, it's important to recognize that the land sustains us. So I am grateful for the Greenbelt, Oak Ridges Moraine and Niagara Escarpment as they contain valuable farmland and important green spaces. It's essential we keep protecting them for future generations.”

- Joyce Chau
Executive Director at EcoSpark



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