



Summary of Key Takeaways from Roundtable Discussion on Communities & Regional Growth to inform the potential 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and the future success of Ontario's Greenbelt

Introduction

On November 12, 2024, the Greenbelt Foundation hosted a 2-hour roundtable session to explore emerging trends, pressures, and policy opportunities related to communities and regional growth. The session aimed to inform the Greenbelt Foundation's priorities for the upcoming 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and long-term success of the Greenbelt, ensuring it remains effective and resilient for years to come and contributes to the sustainability of Ontario.

The following sections summarize the major themes and issues discussed, reflecting participants' collective input and providing an initial basis for further exploration and strategic considerations in preparation for the Review.

Participants

Participants included experts from the planning and development sectors, conservation authorities, provincial staff, non-governmental organizations, academia, and agricultural organizations. Attendees included representatives from the Regional Planning Commissioners of Ontario, Urban Land Institute, Rural Ontario Institute, Ontario Professional Planning Institute, Niagara Escarpment Commission, York University, Intact Centre on Climate Adaptation, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. Additional written feedback and review was provided by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, Wilton Consulting, the University of Toronto, Niagara Region, and Environmental Defence. Their collective expertise provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing communities and regional growth across the region.

Trends & Pressures

The discussion underscored the Greenbelt's critical role in balancing development, environmental protection, and climate resilience. Participants highlighted challenges driven by Ontario's rapid population growth, shifting provincial planning frameworks, a warming climate and associated impacts, and increasing pressures on the Greenbelt's interconnected systems.

Development Pressures and Changes to Provincial Planning Framework

Recent changes in provincial planning have created significant challenges for municipalities and other stakeholders. A strong focus on creating housing outside of existing urban boundaries has deprioritized other traditional planning considerations including environmental protections and considerations. A lack of consistent and clear direction from the province has left municipalities to navigate a rapidly shifting planning environment with little opportunity for input and has created instability in the provincial planning system.

The Greenbelt region is experiencing adjacent development pressures, necessitating a balance between growth demands and the overarching objectives of the Plans. Provincial decisions and a shifting policy landscape is driving the expansion of settlement areas, intensifying pressures on the Greenbelt's boundaries



and its systems. There are concerns about development and increasing threats to watersheds and water resources and a lack of capacity to evaluate cumulative impacts on natural and agricultural systems. At the same time, the diminishing availability of "Whitebelt" land has further increased the risk of encroachment. For instance, municipalities are increasingly receiving development proposals for recreational uses and fill operations within Greenbelt areas, related to urban development.

The removal of the Growth Plan has further complicated matters, reducing emphasis on intensification and coordinated regional planning. This shift has created gaps in addressing crucial housing needs, such as "missing middle" housing and urban intensification. Additionally, changes to the development charge framework have constrained municipalities' ability to fund necessary infrastructure, hindering efforts to meet growth targets. The limited integration of watershed and natural heritage perspectives into planning changes has also raised concerns about the broader environmental impacts and sustainability of future growth and development.

To address some of these pressures, participants highlighted ecosystem compensation as a strategic tool for municipalities with limited growth capacity. Framing the Greenbelt as a critical resource that provides essential ecological services, such as water retention, flood mitigation and temperature regulation (cooling), is vital to maintaining its role as a cornerstone of sustainable development, rather than positioning it as an impediment to growth.

Articulating the Cost of Growth & the Greenbelt's Value

The value of the Greenbelt needs to be communicated beyond the lens of conservation, reframing it as a vital resource that provides greater benefits in its current state than if developed. Emphasis should be placed on articulating the cost of unchecked growth and highlighting the immense value of preserving the Greenbelt's natural assets such as ecosystem services (water absorption, flood control, air and water pollution removal, temperature regulation, and cultural services) and climate resilience.

Recognizing the Greenbelt as global model for sustainable planning showcases Ontario's leadership in balancing growth with environmental protection. Celebrating the unique benefits of the Great Lakes region, which are often underappreciated, can further strengthen public appreciation and support for the Greenbelt.

Climate Change & Disaster Resilience

Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as flooding, heatwaves, and drought. These events are driving up insurable and uninsured damages for buildings and infrastructure, causing suffering and harming the health of people and populations, straining public health systems, harming natural environments including degrading water resources through increased runoff, erosion, and contamination which is impacting water quantity and quality. Protecting and enhancing healthy natural systems, including those in the Greenbelt, can reduce risks and strengthen the resilience of communities across the region.

Participants highlighted a critical gap in public and policymaker awareness of the scale and urgency of these risks, often resulting in insufficient action to reduce risks. To address these pressures, they emphasized the importance of embedding disaster resilience and climate adaptation strategies directly into



Greenbelt policies. Doing so would better equip communities to withstand and recover from the escalating climate impacts, protect critical infrastructure, and support public health.

Transportation Infrastructure

The expansion of transportation infrastructure has emerged as a key pressure on the Greenbelt, with misaligned planning decisions often facilitating growth in inappropriate areas. Highway projects are facilitating growth in the wrong places, rather than areas that align with smart growth principles. Insufficient highway infrastructure in many parts of the GTA has led to widespread gridlock, with participants underscoring the need for strategic investments in regional transit.

Participants emphasized the need to rethink transportation networks to prioritize low-impact solutions that align with the Greenbelt's objectives while meeting the demands of population growth. Participants emphasized the need to reintegrate the objectives of Metrolinx, the Growth Plan (revoked), and Greenbelt Plans to ensure that transportation networks align with Plan goals and reduce undue pressure on sensitive lands. Prioritizing transit improvements over highway expansion is critical to supporting sustainable growth while reducing reliance on car-dependent infrastructure.

Plan Effectiveness

Participants agreed that the Greenbelt effectively supports a strong rural economy and sustains the character of the countryside while promoting complete, low-carbon communities that enhance human health, social well-being, and environmental sustainability. To enhance the effectiveness of the Plans and address emerging challenges, several key recommendations were proposed, including:

- **Refine Greenbelt Plans** by assessing opportunities to develop shared rules and definitions to improve coordination and management while preserving the unique intent of each plan, ensuring streamlined decision-making doesn't weaken critical protections.
- **Reinforce alignment of Greenbelt plans with other provincial plans** (e.g., Metrolinx, Growth Plan and Provincial Planning Statement, and watershed-specific plans like the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan) to ensure consistency.
- **Identify opportunities to accommodate growth** while maintaining the overarching objectives of the Greenbelt Plans. For instance, explore strategic growth near transit hubs rather than incremental expansions of Towns and Villages; consider ecosystem compensation as a tool to address growth challenges in municipalities with limited capacity; and assess the feasibility of additional tools to support dense growth while ensuring environmental safeguards.
- **Strengthen protections for water systems** by leveraging existing source water protection legislation and developing policy frameworks to address water quality issues, such as road salt contamination and stormwater management, which are inadequately addressed in current updates prioritizing quantity.



- **Incorporate climate projections for Southern Ontario**, including map(s) showing the increase in temperatures (number of very hot days over 30°C, and warmest maximum temperature) by mid-century. This would emphasize the importance and value of Greenbelt land to moderate temperatures and provide protection against extreme weather (flood, extreme heat, drought) for residents in adjacent, densely populated areas in Southern Ontario.
- **Incorporate hazard management policies** to address risks associated with changes to the Conservation Authorities Act.
- **Expand the Greenbelt** to include additional high-value lands near development pressures to enhance its role in managing growth and protecting natural resources.

Process & Implementation Opportunities

Participants suggested several opportunities to enhance implementation and support the Greenbelt's long-term success:

- Enhance performance monitoring by developing and implementing consistent evaluation frameworks across all Greenbelt Plan areas to evaluate policy effectiveness and track progress on key objectives.
- Develop guidance documents to clarify and align policies, ensuring easier implementation and greater clarity among plan users.
- Address gaps in tools and capacity to evaluate cumulative impacts of development on natural systems, including large homes on prime agricultural lands, groundwater extraction, and infrastructure projects.
- Scale ecosystem compensation protocols (e.g., TRCA's framework) to formalize them within Provincial Plans and Environmental Assessment commitments, such as 400-series highways.

Next Steps

The Foundation would like to extend our appreciation for participants' time in attending the roundtable session and sharing your views and experiences. We look forward to continuing to collaborate and build on these initial discussions to refine priorities for the Review and address broader issues that are critical to the long-term success of the Greenbelt.