



Summary of Key Takeaways from Roundtable Discussion on Greenspace, Tourism and Recreation 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 Greenspace, Tourism, and Recreation. 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

The roundtable brought together experts from conservation authorities, land trusts, trail organizations, local governments, and Indigenous leaders. Represented groups included Credit Valley Conservation, Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority, Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority, Kawartha Conservation Authority, Bruce Trail Conservancy, Oak Ridges Trail Association, Waterfront Regeneration Trust, Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust, the Moccasin Identifier Project, and the Township of Uxbridge. Additional written feedback and review was provided by Green Durham Association, Parks and Recreation Ontario, Grey Sauble Conservation, and Tourism Hamilton. Their collective expertise provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing greenspace, tourism, and recreation across the Greenbelt.

Trends & Pressures

Trends and pressures shared during the discussion highlight the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives and voices, enhancing public education and outreach, and balancing the need for ecological preservation and equitable access to nature.

Growing Demands on Greenspace

Demand for greenspace has surged and continues to outpace population growth, driven in part by urbanization and heightened interest during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to overcrowding, poor user behaviour, and degradation of natural areas. Participants suggested innovative solutions are needed to increase access to greenspace, including partnerships with private or institutional landowners, promoting sustainable use through education and conservation pledges, and adopting models of controlled access to balance ecological health with public enjoyment.

This demand is particularly pronounced in underserved communities, where access to greenspace remains insufficient. Participants stressed that equitable solutions must prioritize proximity to where people live, ensuring greenspaces are easily and regularly accessible to maximize health benefits. Inclusive access options, such as transit and active transportation, are also critical to ensure all communities benefit.



The intensified focus on addressing the housing crisis has shifted government priorities away from increasing greenspaces or improving access to them. Recent legislative changes, including amendments to the Conservation Authorities Act and the dissolution of regional government, have reduced municipal capacity and weakened coordinated growth management, creating barriers to achieving Greenbelt objectives related to greenspace, tourism and recreation.

Participants also noted a decline in volunteer engagement, which has traditionally played a vital role in trail maintenance, invasive species removal, and citizen science. Rebuilding support for volunteerism and local stewardship was seen as essential to sustaining the health and accessibility of the Greenbelt's greenspaces.

Strengthening Connections to Greenspaces

Greenspaces, recreation, and tourism foster a strong sense of place and connection to the Greenbelt, building public support for its protection. The Greenbelt's trail system has been particularly effective in creating emotional connections and fostering appreciation for natural heritage and community connectedness. Expanding and promoting these experiences can further deepen public support and sustain conservation efforts. Participants also suggested that continuing to create more iconic greenspaces like the Bruce Trail could further strengthen the Greenbelt's identity and ensure long-term protection.

Building political and public support for the Greenbelt requires clear communication strategies that highlight its diversity and significance. Capitalizing on its growing prominence in public discussions can further reinforce its value and foster broader engagement.

Signage plays a key role in creating a sense of identity for the Greenbelt, however, current signage is limited, offering little guidance or visibility into the Greenbelt's features and benefits. Improving signage systems can enhance navigation across trails, parks, and landmarks while fostering a stronger sense of place. Emphasizing the Greenbelt's scale and significance, such as its "over 2 million acres of protected land", can boost public awareness and pride, reinforcing its value as a vital natural and community resource.

Expanding Recreational and Cultural Opportunities

Trails and routes such as the Greenbelt Cycling Route, Bruce Trail, and Oak Ridges Moraine Trail have become central to Greenbelt recreation and tourism, offering significant opportunities for economic growth and community connection. Participants emphasized the need to improve accessibility and establish a connected network of trails, parks, and communities—including links to destinations like Rouge National Urban Park and the new Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park. Suggestions included expanding active transportation options and leveraging GO Transit as a gateway to greenspaces to make trails more reachable. Investments in infrastructure that support both tourism and broader community needs are essential for sustainable development, enhanced accessibility, and greater public engagement with the Greenbelt.

Demand is increasing for culturally immersive tourism and recreational opportunities that authentically highlight local Indigenous histories, customs and traditions, exemplified by initiatives like the Moccasin Identifier Project. Participants proposed creating permanent spaces within the Greenbelt, such as culturally significant sites along trails to facilitate experiential learning, foster connections to the land, and share cultural practices.



Climate Change Impacts

Climate change is intensifying pressures on greenspaces, with natural heritage areas increasingly vulnerable to invasive species, habitat degradation, and climate-related hazards that threaten accessibility and ecosystem health. Extreme weather events, such as storms and flooding, are causing significant trail damage and prolonged closures. Participants noted that proactive strategies are needed to mitigate these impacts and ensure the long-term sustainability of greenspaces.

Plan Effectiveness

Participants agreed that the Greenbelt is vital to preserving the region's cultural heritage, promoting recreation, and fostering sustainable tourism, contributing to community well-being, accessible outdoor activities, and economic development. To enhance the effectiveness of the Plans and address emerging challenges, several recommendations were proposed, including:

- **Acknowledging First Nations and Indigenous Peoples in the Plans** by incorporating land securement strategies for ceremonial uses, harvesting, and stewardship practices, integrating traditional knowledge and historical narratives, and exploring land-back opportunities to support reconciliation and inclusive greenspace management.
- **Strengthening protections** to prevent legislative changes from undermining Greenbelt objectives.
- **Increasing policy flexibility**, such as zoning adjustments for Conservation Authority operations and innovative tourism opportunities. Policies could emphasize intent (e.g., enjoying greenspace) rather than narrowly defining allowable activities to accommodate emerging, unique experiences.
- **Include targets for greenspace** access per population in the Plans to ensure equitable access and address growing demand.
- **Revisit the Niagara Escarpment Plan's tourism section and objectives** to improve implementation and align with broader Greenbelt goals.

Process & Implementation Opportunities

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

- Developing additional tools, such as an actionable implementation plan, to support achieving Plan objectives.
- Improving access to comprehensive, actionable data to track Greenbelt progress and identify areas for improvement. Key data gaps include equity metrics (e.g., proximity and transit access to greenspaces) and economic contributions of trails (e.g., visitor spending and local business impacts).



Possibility grows here.

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- Framing the Greenbelt through a tourism and economic lens by leveraging existing provincial tourism investments (e.g., Destination Ontario and RTOs) to strengthen government support and align with broader economic goals. Emphasizing the economic impact of trails and greenspaces can help engage municipalities and justify ongoing investment.
- Securing additional funding to create, maintain, and manage greenspaces effectively, and addressing challenges with cash-in-lieu policies by exploring centralized approaches to pool and allocate funds strategically where they are most needed. A central authority, such as the Province, could lead this effort to reduce costs for smaller municipalities and conservation authorities.

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.