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## **Stakeholder engagement to inform the 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and the future success of Ontario's Greenbelt**

### **Summary of discussion from a virtual engagement session on Greenspace, Tourism & Recreation**

#### **Introduction**

On Wednesday April 30, 2025, the Greenbelt Foundation hosted an engagement session to continue conversations identifying greenspace, tourism and recreation policies related to the Greenbelt. The purpose of this session was to revisit what we heard during an in-person roundtable discussion held in November 2024, to refine key ideas, and discuss specific policy, implementation, or administrative changes in the Greenbelt Plans that would improve access to greenspace, and opportunities for tourism and recreation.

The session is part of a series of issue-specific stakeholder engagements held by the Foundation between November 2024 and June 2025 to inform our priorities for the upcoming 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and the long-term success of the Greenbelt, ensuring it remains effective and resilient for years to come and contributes to the sustainability of Ontario.

In addition to stakeholder engagement, the Foundation is also undertaking other activities in preparation for the Review including research and mapping projects to provide insights into emerging trends and pressures and support evidence-based decision-making.

#### **Overview of Discussions**

The previous Greenspace, Tourism and Recreation roundtable focused on the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives and voices, and discussed growing demands for greenspace, strengthening community connections to greenspaces, expanding recreation and cultural opportunities, and addressing climate change impacts. In addition, participants proposed specific policy recommendations that would improve the effectiveness of the Plans (Appendix I). Select topics requiring further discussion were carried forward to the recent virtual engagement session. The memo summarizing the previous roundtable session can be found [here](#).

The recent virtual engagement session focused on the following policy topics:

- 1) Recreation policies
- 2) Engaging local First Nations and Indigenous Peoples
- 3) Regional large parks and trail planning

A total of 10 people participated in the engagement session (Appendix II). There was consensus that Greenbelt policies for recreation should be broadened and strengthened to better reflect current needs, pressures and modern approaches to park and trail planning. The group noted the importance of clearly defining roles and responsibilities within the plans to support recreation

objectives and collaboration among municipalities and with the province. Opportunities to enhance Indigenous leadership and participation in greenspace planning and management could be created through place-based initiatives and shared governance frameworks.

Participants also agreed on the need for a regional greenspace policy framework that sets measurable targets and provides implementation support. Several participants suggested positioning trails and parks as essential infrastructure that contribute to community health, resilience, and the economy – key factors in creating complete communities and attracting new investments and jobs.

## **Policy Issue #1 – Recreation Policies**

Participants emphasized the multiple benefits of parks and trail networks and identified clear opportunities to strengthen recreation objectives and greenspace protection policies across the Plans. They highlighted the connection between the enjoyment of nature and cultivating public support for the Greenbelt, while also underscoring the importance of directing intensive, or high-impact, recreation uses to appropriate locations and strengthening enforcement mechanisms to maintain the ecological integrity of natural systems. With provincial leadership, the Plans should encourage municipalities to embed trail recreation and parkland accessibility and investment into planning for complete communities and support volunteer stewardship programs.

Participants recommended the following:

- Strengthening policy direction and language across the Plans to provide a clear vision for appropriate, low-impact recreation types and intensities and greater protection of natural systems to support ecological integrity.
- Aligning recreation and ecological connectivity policies by supporting a cores and corridors approach to parks and trail planning, recognizing co-benefits for natural heritage, biodiversity, climate resilience, recreation, and active transportation.
- Recognizing parks and trail systems as essential infrastructure in complete community planning and providing implementation and disaster-relief support through provincially targeted funding streams.
- Including equity, accessibility and social benefit indicators in future Greenbelt performance metrics.
- Increasing enforcement mechanisms such as controlled access points, active monitoring, and restoration initiatives to address and reverse degradation in sensitive areas.

## **Discussion Highlights**

### ***Clarify and Modernize Recreation Policies***

Current recreation policies across the Greenbelt are narrowly defined, distinguishing between passive and active uses. This lack of clarity has contributed to inconsistent interpretation and application, with some municipalities and conservation authorities facing challenges in expanding or managing trail access. Definitions of permitted recreation types should be broadened to reflect inclusive, modern uses, such as cycling, wellness-focused trails, and culturally sensitive uses.

Language should be harmonized across the Greenbelt Plans to avoid discrepancies and strengthen protections (e.g., “shall” vs “encourage”).

Recreation policies should also reinforce co-benefits for wildlife and communities including opportunities to enhance natural heritage systems and biodiversity, strengthen climate resilience and rural economies, and support mental and physical health.

### ***Improve Enforcement***

Enforcement of trail use policies is inadequate, particularly where trails intersect with private land or occur in remote areas. Stakeholders expressed concern over the rise of unauthorized motorized recreation (e.g., ATVs, dirt bikes, “mud trucks”) on Greenbelt lands, which contributes to ecological degradation. Policies should be expanded to address trail sustainability and user impacts (e.g., erosion, overuse, habitat protection). Enforcement capacity could be strengthened through dedicated funding, strategic partnerships with local authorities and First Nations, and higher fines for habitat damage.

Participants noted that enforcement agencies often lack capacity to police large rural areas. Every instance of trail or off-trail damage can set back ecological restoration efforts. Land trusts that provide public access face major challenges when off-road abuse occurs. The group also discussed pressures to convert Greenbelt land for dubious “recreation” purposes near urban areas, occasionally facilitated by MZOs.

### ***Leverage Education Opportunities and Social Benefits***

Recreation within the Greenbelt offers significant opportunities to build public understanding of conservation values and foster community stewardship. Volunteers, including seniors and youth, are vital to trail maintenance and engagement efforts and should be formally supported through policy and programming.

Future iterations of the Greenbelt Plans should incorporate equity, accessibility, and social benefit indicators into planning and performance metrics. In addition, the inclusion of low-cost, place-based infrastructure—such as rest areas, “wind phones,” cultural storytelling zones, and Indigenous interpretive features—can enhance mental health outcomes, cultural connection, and inclusive use of greenspace.

### **Resources/ Follow Up**

- [Bruce Trail 2030 Strategy](#)
- [Great Lakes to Greenbelt Cycling Trails](#)
- [Leamington Active Transportation Plan](#)

### **Policy Issue #2 – Acknowledging First Nations and Indigenous Peoples in the Plans**

The Greenbelt Plans include goals related to identifying, conserving, and managing cultural heritage resources, with an expectation that this work will be undertaken in collaboration with stakeholders and First Nations communities. While the Province holds a duty to consult on major projects, and some municipalities have adopted policy language recognizing Indigenous Knowledge and practices, implementation is inconsistent.

Participants identified limited capacity as a primary barrier to meaningful engagement with First Nations communities as many are already overburdened by consultation requests and projects.

Participants noted that it takes time to build relationships and greater effort is needed to create meaningful opportunities.

Participants supported:

- Developing and sharing examples of Indigenous place-making initiatives.
- Creating learning and relationship building opportunities through symposiums and other activities and events.

## Discussion Highlights

### *The Need for Inclusive Approaches*

Participants advocated for inclusive partnership models such as roundtables, co-governance frameworks and co-design processes, that bring together Indigenous communities, municipalities, and trail organizations. These structures would enable the creation of Indigenous-led spaces with the Greenbelt, including opportunities for ceremonial access and cultural place-making and storytelling within parks and trails.

Engagement should be tailored to reflect the specific interests, histories and needs of each First Nation community. Successful models of collaboration and governance, whether focused on stewardship, planning, or cultural programming, should be shared, as appropriate, to encourage learning across the landscape.

### *Sustained Engagement Requires Sustained Support*

Participants stressed that effective Indigenous engagement must be supported by long-term, predictable funding—not limited to project-based consultation. Dedicated resources are needed to support community capacity, compensate Indigenous expertise and leadership, and enable ongoing involvement in Greenbelt implementation, monitoring, and governance.

## Resources/ Follow Up

- [Point Pelee's Indigenous play space](#)
- [Oak Ridges Moraine Trail Strategy](#)
- [Moccasin Identifier Project](#)

## Policy Issue #3 – Regional large parks planning

Participants spent considerable time discussing the pressing need and benefits to expanding and connecting a regional system of parklands and trails across the Greenbelt, including the Niagara Escarpment, Oak Ridges Moraine, river valleys, and provincial and federal parks. While current policies encourage the development of parks and trails, they lack specific targets and implementation mechanisms to ensure consistent progress and maintaining a standard of access for growing populations.

In practice, park creation and trail linkages is dependent on municipal priorities, resources and land availability. This is leading to a reduction in per capita access to greenspace for many residents across the region. This patchwork approach has also led to missed opportunities to establish a

cohesive, accessible, and ecologically resilient greenspace network that benefits both people, biodiversity and wildlife.

The following actions were supported:

- Establishing a clear provincial framework—regionally-based, with defined objectives, targets and support tools to respond to the rising demand for greenspace and ensure equitable access across communities.
- Integrating regional and local active transportation plans and ecological cores and corridor networks with this framework, and parks and trails development, to maximize co-benefits for healthy communities, biodiversity and climate resilience.
- Enabling and empowering partnerships with municipalities, Indigenous communities, conservation authorities, land trusts, and volunteer groups to mobilize capacity and drive coordinated action across jurisdictions.

## Discussion Highlights

### *The Need for Provincial Leadership*

Efforts to improve greenspace connectivity are hindered by the lack of a province-wide standard or framework. Trails are under pressure from population growth, climate change, and inconsistent municipal cooperation. Greenspaces serve a broader diversity of users, including underserved communities, newcomers, youth, seniors, and migrant farm workers. Coordination is needed between conservation authorities, land trusts, and municipalities. Greenspace connectivity via active transportation corridors and designated trails should be prioritized by the province.

### Resources/ Follow Up:

- [Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System](#)
- [Credit Valley Conservation Watershed Plan - Chapter 4: Greenspace and Recreation](#)
- [The Meadoway](#)
- [Improving Access to Large Parks in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe](#)
- County of Essex [Active Transportation System](#) & cycling initiative for [migrant workers](#)

### Next steps

The Foundation would like to extend our appreciation for participants' time in attending the virtual engagement session and sharing your views and experiences. If you have more information or feedback for us, please contact us by July 18, 2025.

The Foundation has completed a total of ten issue-specific discussions on the upcoming 10-year Review with a broad group of stakeholders across the region. We are currently developing a comprehensive summary of key policy positions and recommendations. The summary will include input from roundtables held in November 2024 and the virtual sessions held this spring. Memos from both sessions will be available [here](#).

We look forward to continuing to engage with you to confirm alignment, agreement and support with our key areas of focus for the upcoming Review.

## Appendix I. List of policy recommendations discussed at the November 2024 roundtable.

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.
- 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).
- 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.

**Appendix II. List of participating organizations in the Greenspace, Tourism and Recreation virtual engagement session.**

- Oak Ridges Trail Association
- Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust
- Bruce Trail Conservancy
- Waterfront Regeneration Trust
- Parks and Recreation Ontario
- Credit Valley Conservation Authority
- Grand River Conservation Authority
- Kawartha Conservation
- Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority