

# GROWING THE GREENBELT



Mark Mitanis

**T**he Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing will be reviewing feedback received over the past two months on ways to grow the size of the Greenbelt following a public comment period that ended on April 19. While environmental groups advocate for a more ambitious approach to protecting valuable land and water sources in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, at least one township has concerns about the potential impacts of Greenbelt expansion on its economic livelihood. The initial study area being assessed by the province for consideration for Greenbelt expansion includes most of the **Township of Puslinch**, an area that falls within the Paris-Galt Moraine.

On February 17, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing began a public consultation through the [Environmental Registry of Ontario](#) (ERO), inviting feedback on how to expand and enhance the province's existing Greenbelt. The province's proposal for Greenbelt expansion, posted to the ERO, includes an initial study area focused on the Paris-Galt Moraine, an area of sand and gravel deposits running from Caledon in the northeast to

Brantford in the southwest. The moraine helps protect groundwater aquifers that provide drinking water to over 800,000 people in the Grand River Watershed.

The Paris-Galt Moraine study area covers approximately 21,400 hectares of land in **Wellington County**, including 15,000 hectares of land in the Township of Puslinch, 2,200 hectares of land in **Guelph/Eramosa Township**, and 4,100 hectares of land in the **Town of Erin**. Over half of the study area in Wellington County is land designated for agricultural uses, and almost 40 per cent is in the protected Greenlands System of Wellington County's Official Plan.

A staff report received by the County of Wellington

planning committee on March 11 says that policies within its regional Official Plan already provide adequate protection of the functions of the Paris-Galt Moraine, and that there is no major growth anticipated in the Paris-Galt Moraine study area that would warrant an expansion of the Greenbelt.

The Township of Puslinch surrounds the southern end of Guelph, and **Aberfoyle** is its administrative centre. About 23 per cent of the township is currently located within the Greenbelt, and a proposed expansion could place an additional 70 per cent of the township within the Greenbelt. On March 24, Puslinch council unanimously requested that the province not consider expansion of the Greenbelt into

the township unless a number of conditions were addressed.

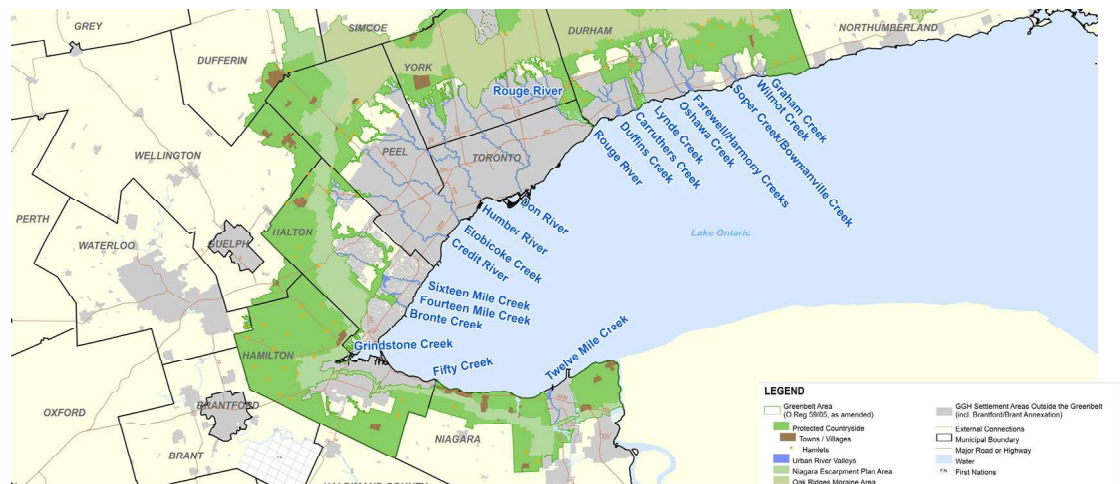
Among the conditions outlined by Puslinch council is a request that land adjacent to the township's current and future provincial highways be designated for future development.

**Guelph & District Home Builders' Association** president

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Map showing the 21 urban river valleys and associated coastal wetlands located within Ontario's Greenbelt. The Greenbelt currently provides protection for publicly-owned lands within 60 metres of the province's urban river valleys. The province is reviewing feedback collected from stakeholders on expanding the Greenbelt to potentially include additional publicly-owned land along urban river valleys.

SOURCE: PROVINCE OF ONTARIO



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**Tom McLaughlin** said that growth in the Guelph area would logically occur to the south on lands with close access to Highway 401, Highway 6, and Brock Road.

“That’s very important land for Puslinch and Aberfoyle to grow in the future,” McLaughlin told *NRU*. “Bringing the Greenbelt all the way up the border of Guelph ends that availability.”

McLaughlin said most of the land in the Puslinch and Aberfoyle areas is not prime agricultural land that would merit Greenbelt protection, but is identified in the Wellington County Official Plan as secondary agricultural land, where continued agricultural use is promoted, but a range of other uses—including small-scale commercial, industrial and institutional—are permitted.

Other conditions included in the Township of Puslinch’s motion included the provision of provincial funding for property tax support programs for lands impacted by Greenbelt expansion and financial compensation for the potential loss of growth resulting from restrictions on land severances.

“A lot of Puslinch’s current growth is coming through severances, and that could go away once the Greenbelt put in place,” McLaughlin told *NRU*.

“It takes away from the farmer’s ability to sever a parcel.”

The township saw “some reduction in severance activity when the Greenbelt first came in,” according to Puslinch councillor **Matthew Bulmer**, who added that further expansion of the Greenbelt into the township will have an impact on development in the area. “We have limited growth potential as it is, and we don’t know how much it’s going to be limited after the fact. But what we do know is that there’s going

to be some impact,” Bulmer told *NRU*.

Wellington County is currently conducting a municipal comprehensive review (MCR) to ensure its Official Plan conforms with provincial policies and plans, including the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* and the *Greenbelt Plan*. Through the MCR, the county is able to refine provincial mapping of the *Growth Plan*’s natural heritage systems and agricultural land base, which serve to protect the Greater Golden Horseshoe’s natural heritage, biodiversity, and productive agricultural lands.

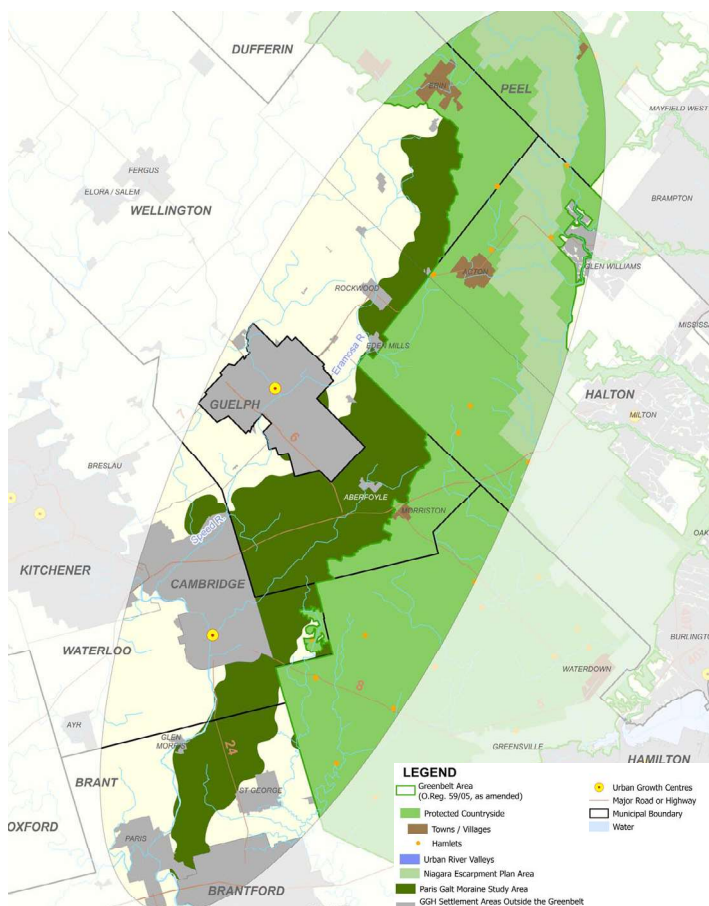
Bulmer said that the provincial mapping determines where and what policies of

the Greenbelt apply, and that existing provincial mapping doesn’t sufficiently capture the reality on the ground.

“A lot of things that were not primary agricultural land were labelled as primary agricultural land, or things that were natural heritage features were shown as prime agricultural land or secondary agricultural land,” Bulmer told *NRU*. “If the Greenbelt were to expand now, the existing mapping with all of its inherent errors would become the basis for the Greenbelt policies, which would mean that we aren’t protecting the right things for the right reasons; we would be knowingly protecting some of the wrong things for the wrong reasons. It would direct growth in places either where we shouldn’t have it, or it would be preventing growth [in areas] where we previously could have had it.”

Puslinch councillors want to ensure the municipal comprehensive review process is completed prior to the proposed Greenbelt expansion, and that the provincial mapping is also refined before any expansion takes place.

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Map showing the study area (dark green) for the Paris-Galt Moraine, which could be afforded Greenbelt protection under a new provincial proposal to expand the Greenbelt. The Paris-Galt Moraine runs approximately from Caledon in the northeast to Brantford in the southwest, and features hilly terrain with sand and gravel deposits, helping to protect groundwater aquifers that provide drinking water for rural communities.

SOURCE: PROVINCE OF ONTARIO



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Bulmer said the council motion initially started as a blanket opposition to Greenbelt expansion.

“I’ve been on both sides of this, I was on council when the Greenbelt was first put into place, and I was proud to be part of pulling it into the township,” Bulmer told *NRU*. “If we are allowed to complete the MCR process prior to the Greenbelt being put in place, that would be an efficient use of time. It’s very difficult for anybody to make an appropriate assessment as to what the impact of it is going to be.”

McLaughlin said the development community in Ontario has learned to live with existing Greenbelt protections, but that the Greenbelt and Growth Plans have constrained the supply of housing across the Greater Golden Horseshoe and have driven up the demand and price for ground-related housing like single-detached residences.

“Ontario’s got a lot of people coming in. Those people need to live somewhere and the market still demands ground-related dwellings, and that’s what people are looking for,” McLaughlin told *NRU*. “If we want to attract the future talent, we really have to match the market demands with

what’s out there. Because at the end of the day, this is a global economy.”

As part of its consultation on expanding the size of the Greenbelt, the province is also reviewing ideas for the addition, expansion, and further protection of publicly-owned lands in urban river valleys. Currently, the Greenbelt includes 21 urban

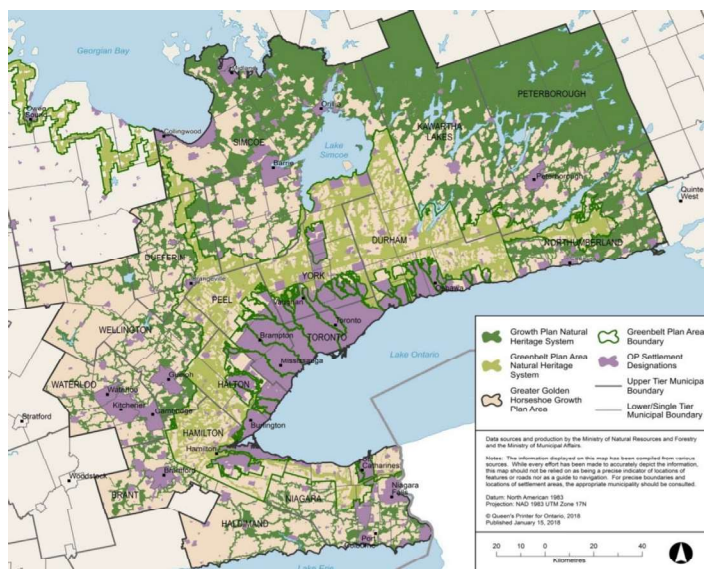
river valleys and associated coastal wetlands, and the province says there may be opportunities for additional urban river valleys to be added, or existing ones to be expanded to include additional publicly-owned land.

**Ontario Nature** director of conservation and education **Anne Bell** said that urbanization and development is occurring on private land, not on public land like municipal parks. “The big advantage of the Greenbelt is the way that it controls development and puts limits on development. And the real

threats in terms of development near river valleys is not on public lands,” Bell told *NRU*.

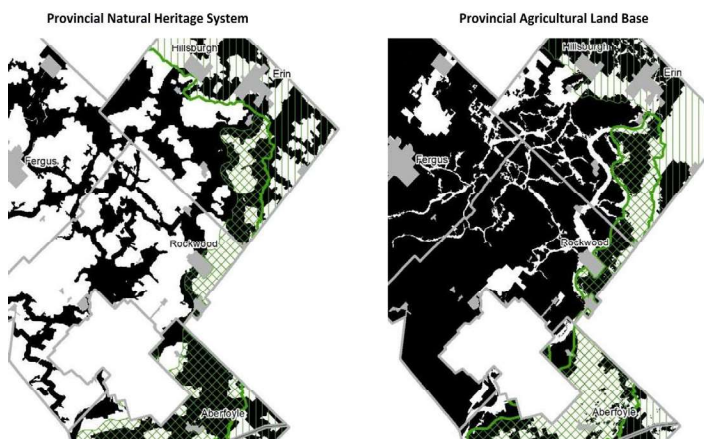
Before the April 19 provincial deadline for public comments, Ontario Nature and an additional 47 organizations including **Environmental Defence** and the **David Suzuki Foundation** submitted a collective letter to the province calling for a more ambitious approach to Greenbelt expansion. The organizations recommend expanding the Greenbelt to include the former Glacial Lake Algonquin and Iroquois Shorelines and Plain, the Lake Simcoe basin and

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Map showing the natural heritage systems of the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (dark green) and the Greenbelt (yellow-green) that protect the region’s natural heritage and biodiversity. The Growth Plan natural heritage system is supported by provincial mapping and provides protections similar to those of the Greenbelt Plan. Upper- and single-tier municipalities in the GGH have the opportunity to refine provincial mapping of the Growth Plan natural heritage system through the municipal comprehensive review process.

SOURCE: PROVINCE OF ONTARIO



Maps of the southernmost municipalities—including the Township of Guelph/Eramosa, Township of Puslinch, and Town of Erin—within the County of Wellington, showing the relationship between current Greenbelt boundaries, the Paris-Galt Moraine study area, provincial natural heritage systems (dark green) of the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and the Greenbelt (left), and the prime agricultural areas (dark green) which form part of the agricultural land base of the Growth Plan (right).

SOURCE: COUNTY OF WELLINGTON

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northern Simcoe County, and all moraines in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. They also recommend including coldwater streams, wetlands, and headwater areas in future Greenbelt expansion plans.

Bell said expanding the Greenbelt would improve the resiliency of local food systems, would help combat climate change, and would guarantee access to green spaces critical to an individual's physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health.

"We need access to nature and we can't continue to carve away at those green spaces that are so vital to our well-being," Bell told *NRU*. "If you pave over the landscape, you are dramatically reducing our ability to adapt and be resilient to climate change. And one of the best solutions we have is to maintain our green space, natural areas, moraines, and wetlands that are able to store water and ensure that flooding is reduced."

Concerned about the loss of productive farmland across the province, the **Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario** is asking for all prime agricultural areas across Ontario to be included in the Greenbelt. In its submission to the province, the **Ontario Federation of Agriculture** says

all lands in Ontario outside of current urban boundaries should be included within the Greenbelt to address the "leapfrogging" of development activity onto lands immediately beyond the Greenbelt.

The **Ontario Headwaters Institute (OHI)** is also urging the province to expand its horizons by adding to the Greenbelt the complete natural heritage and agricultural systems across the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 'bluebelt' lands, and key headwater areas. Bluebelt areas are ecologically-important watersheds which include headwater features, significant ground and surface water features, source water areas, and urban river valley connections, which all play a role in protecting the region's water resources.

"The components of the Greenbelt Plan were needed innovations when they were introduced, but given the growth of population and development, the threats to natural heritage and agriculture, and the onset of climate change, its current area and protections will be seen as needing expansion," OHI executive director **Andrew McCammon** told *NRU*.

McCammon said current Greenbelt policies need to be bolstered as developers

purchase huge swaths of unprotected agricultural land and municipalities consider expanding their urban boundaries. Municipalities need provincial guidance for sustainable land use planning that would address community design, wastewater, and the environmental and energy

performance of developments, McCammon told *NRU*.

The province will not consider Greenbelt land removal requests or reducing existing Greenbelt protections. The comment period for the provincial proposal began on February 17 and closed on April 19. 🌱

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