
Subject: Growing the Greenbelt Environmental Registry of Ontario Posting

Report to: Planning and Economic Committee

Report date: Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Recommendations

1. That Report PDS 18-2021 and its appendices **BE RECEIVED** for information; and
2. That this report and its appendices **BE CIRCULATED** to the Local Area Municipalities, and the Local Area Municipalities consider identifying additional lands and Urban River Valleys for Greenbelt protection, responding directly to the Province through the Environmental Registry of Ontario.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to respond to the Province's proposal "*Consultation on growing the size of the Greenbelt*". As part of this exercise, the Province is seeking feedback through six discussion questions.
- The Province's proposal is premised around 3 key areas:
 - An opportunity for Local Municipalities to identify additional Greenbelt expansions including Urban River Valley considerations;
 - Seeking feedback on balancing other Provincial priorities with Greenbelt expansions.
 - A Greenbelt expansion study area for the Paris Galt Moraine (located outside of Niagara Region);
- The proposal will not consider removals from the Greenbelt Plan area;
- As part of the 2015-2017 Provincial Plan review, Niagara Region and its local municipalities identified over 1400 hectares of additional lands for Greenbelt protection, resulting in Greenbelt expansions in Thorold and Grimsby.

- Responses on the current proposal are due to the Province on or before April 19, 2021.
- Niagara Region staff comments in response to discussion questions are included as Appendix I.

Financial Considerations

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Analysis

Background

The Greenbelt Plan was first introduced through Provincial legislation in 2004. In Niagara, the Greenbelt Plan primarily introduced protections for Specialty Crop areas in north Niagara.

In 2013, the Province released Amendment 1 to the Greenbelt Plan, introducing the concept of an Urban River Valley (URV). The URV designation serves as a linkage between interior Greenbelt lands, urban areas, and Lake Ontario.

The 12 Mile Creek within the St. Catharines urban area was one of the first URVs. Prior to the URV designation, the 12 Mile Creek watershed was partially identified through the Specialty Crop designation with identification of the creek ending at the St. Catharines urban area boundary.

In 2015, at the start of the Province's 10-year review of the Greenbelt Plan, the Region and its local municipalities identified approximately 1,400 hectares (3,459 acres) of new land for Greenbelt protection. When the 2017 Greenbelt Plan was released, these lands were added to the Greenbelt's Protected Countryside designation, making Niagara one of only 3 regions to identify additional lands for Greenbelt protection.

Current ERO Proposal

On February 17, 2021, the Province released a proposal seeking feedback through 6 discussion questions on growing the Greenbelt. This proposal was shared on the Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO).

The primary focus of this proposal is the identification of a study area for the Paris Galt Moraine, located outside of Niagara.

Additionally, the proposal asks about identification of additional lands that can support the growth of the Greenbelt. It also notes opportunities to identify new URVs or to extend current URV designated lands beyond the current 60 metre buffer, where public land ownership exists beyond the 60 metre threshold (such as government owned land, parks and conservation lands).

Niagara Region Staff prepared a response to the Province's discussion questions, attached as Appendix I. Staff support the Province's objectives with this proposal. A summary of Staff response is as follows:

- Identification of Regional and local municipal Greenbelt projects that would benefit from additional Provincial support, such as agricultural irrigation;
- Support for local municipalities to explore additional Greenbelt land and URV designations;
- Exploring opportunities to prioritize parkland expansions in the Greenbelt, including use of Provincial and Federal lands;
- Highlighting the Region's draft Official Plan work that targets growth to settlement areas, with intensification rates that will meet or exceed provincial targets.

While the ERO proposal provides a feedback mechanism for local municipalities to identify lands for consideration, the process to move municipally-identified additions forward is outlined in section 5.6.1.4 of the Greenbelt Plan. The policies indicate that to consider local municipal requests, the Province shall be guided by criteria developed for municipalities. These criteria include:

- Providing supportive Council resolutions;
- Demonstrating how the proposed lands connect physically or functionally to the Greenbelt;
- Demonstrating that a proposal would complement the Growth Plan and support other related provincial initiatives such as the Great Lakes Strategy and Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan.

To support this ERO proposal and to identify additional areas that could benefit from Greenbelt protection:

- In February, Regional Staff circulated the ERO posting to all local area Planning Directors and indicated that any areas for expansion identified by the local municipalities should be communicated directly with the Province and shared with the Region.
- Regional Staff comments have been prepared (Appendix I). These will be shared with local municipalities and the Province after receipt of this Report.

Following the April 19, 2021 commenting period, if areas are identified by the local municipalities for Greenbelt or URV expansion, the Region can coordinate with the local municipality to navigate the Greenbelt Plan amendment process as required.

Alternatives Reviewed

Council could chose not to circulate this Report to the local municipalities. This option is not recommended since the Region regularly works cooperatively, with open communication, with local municipalities on Greenbelt-related matters.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

N/A

Other Pertinent Reports

N/A

Prepared by:
Erik Acs, MCIP, RPP
Manager of Community Planning
Planning and Development Services

Recommended by:
Doug Giles, BES, MUP
Acting Commissioner
Planning and Development Services

Submitted by:

Ron Tripp, P.Eng.
Acting Chief Administrative Officer

This report was reviewed by Isaiah Banach, Acting Director of Community and Long Range Planning.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Staff Response to Provincial Discussion Questions

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ERO Posting: 019-3136 - Consultation on growing the size of the Greenbelt

Provincial discussion questions:

Question 1: What are your thoughts on the initial focus area of the Study Area of the Paris Galt Moraine?

Niagara Region Staff Response: As this study area is located outside of Niagara Region, staff have not reviewed the Paris Galt Moraine component of this proposal.

Question 2: What are the considerations in moving from a Study Area to a more defined boundary of the Paris Galt Moraine?

Niagara Region Staff Response: As this study area is located outside of Niagara Region, staff have not reviewed the Paris Galt Moraine component of this proposal.

Question 3: What are your thoughts on the initial focus area of adding, expanding and further protecting Urban River Valleys?

Niagara Region Staff Response: Regional staff note that the 12 Mile Creek in St. Catharines was one of the first Greenbelt Urban River Valleys (URV) added to the Plan following Amendment 1 to the Greenbelt Plan in 2013. In addition, the City of St. Catharines, with the Region's support, has encouraged the URV vision by creating opportunities for recreational, cultural and tourist amenities in the 12 Mile Creek URV which support the Greenbelt Plan.

Regional staff remain in favour of the URV designation and will support local municipalities who wish to identify new URV's or additional URV lands beyond the current 60 metre threshold for Greenbelt consideration.

Question 4: Do you have suggestions for other potential areas to grow the Greenbelt?

Niagara Region Staff Response: In support of the Province's 10-year review of the Greenbelt Plan which occurred between 2015 and 2017, the Region and its member municipalities worked collectively to identify an additional 1400 hectares (3459 acres) of area to expand Greenbelt protection. When the updated Greenbelt Plan (2017) was released, Niagara was one of only 3 Greenbelt regions with new land added to support the growth of the Greenbelt.

The Region's member municipalities put considerable effort into identifying and justifying new lands for inclusion in the Greenbelt Plan during the Province's 10-year

review in 2017. As the Region and several of its member municipalities are currently working on Provincial Plan conformity, including refinements of the agricultural land base, the identification of additional lands beyond those already added has not occurred. The Region is supportive of the Greenbelt Plan, and supports its member municipalities in the pursuit of identifying additional lands that could benefit from Greenbelt protection.

Question 5: How should we balance or prioritize any potential Greenbelt expansion with the other provincial priorities mentioned above?

Niagara Region Staff Response: This question is premised on the identification of 4 topics identified in the ERO posting as priorities: Growth Management, Infrastructure, Agriculture, and Natural Heritage & Water Resource Systems. Balancing priorities should be based on local considerations. Regional and local governments are best equipped to balance Provincially-identified priorities, with support from the Provincial and Federal government.

Growth Management & Infrastructure: As most of Niagara's Greenbelt land is designated Specialty Crop area, considerations for growth and non-agricultural infrastructure are predetermined through Specialty Crop policies. The draft work on Niagara's Official Plan will targeted growth in its settlement areas, with intensification rates that will meet or exceed provincial targets.

Agriculture: While the Greenbelt Plan has enabling policies that support the agricultural system, the Region and member municipalities have identified a need for agricultural irrigation to support continued farm viability, especially in the tender fruit and grape area. The Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs has offered technical assistance with this initiative; however, prioritizing funding for agricultural infrastructure is important to combat the loss of specialty crop production.

Natural Heritage: Regional staff support the Province's identification of natural heritage and water resource systems as a priority item. This is consistent with the Region's position on these two important topics for our own municipal comprehensive review, where the natural environment has been identified as a key priority. As past and current participants in Greenbelt Foundation grant programs, the Province's commitment of \$12M over 3 years to further support the Greenbelt Foundation will continue to support the identification and protection of Niagara's natural environment.

Question 6: Are there other priorities that should be considered?

Niagara Region Staff Response: In terms of additional areas for prioritization, Section 3.3 of the Greenbelt Plan speaks to parkland, open space and trails. Regional staff

would identify parkland as a priority topic to complement the Province's growth related priorities.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of outdoor public spaces. Prioritizing the identification and/or conversion of Provincially and Federally held lands for park use would support the objectives of the Greenbelt Plan and serve as an important component of complete communities, providing benefits to support environmental protection and climate change adaptation and mitigation.