

Public involvement urged as province officially launches review of Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt plans

By Mark Pavilons

The official launch of the 2015 review of environmental legislation has all groups fully engaged in this important process. The provincial government launched the much anticipated public review of the plans that protect the Oak Ridges Moraine, Niagara Escarpment and Greenbelt last week. This review is an important opportunity to strengthen these plans to further protect water, nature and communities in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

When these plans were first introduced over 10 years ago, they represented the leading edge in conservation planning and protection of our invaluable land and water resources, said Debbe Crandall, policy advisor for Save the Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) Coalition. This review positions the province to re-commit to a strong environmental agenda by strengthening these plans and eliminating policy gaps that have emerged, with the goal of leaving a protected landscape for the next generation of Ontarians.

The appointment of former Toronto mayor David Crombie to lead the 2015 review comes as good news to environmentalists. Crandall said she's inspired by Crombie's appointment. It's really good news, she said.

Crombie, she noted, has the big picture mentality, credibility and smarts to lead this review.

It's a really excellent start to the review (process), she said.

STORM is part of the Oak Ridges Moraine Partnership for 2015, a coalition that includes EcoSpark, Earthroots and Ontario Nature. A key feature of this area is the Oak Ridges Moraine, a 160-kilometre long landform stretching from Caledon and the Niagara Escarpment in the west, running through King to the Trent River system in the east. The moraine, together with the Niagara Escarpment and Protected Countryside, comprise Ontario's Greenbelt; over 720,000 hectares of protected natural habitat, productive agricultural lands and unique rural communities.

The moraine provides countless benefits to communities at no cost, said Joshua Wise, Greenway Program manager at Ontario Nature. It stores and filters our water, helps to control floods, regulates climate, and provides habitat for wildlife as well as places for outdoor recreation.

This review is an opportunity to make sure that these plans remain true to their intent the ongoing protection, enhancement and restoration of southern Ontario's natural heritage.

It's not good enough to protect islands of nature; we need to connect these embattled landscapes. This review should strengthen, not simply maintain, southern Ontario's natural legacy, he added.

This review of the plans provides an opportunity to address activities like the dumping of contaminated soil, unmonitored water takings and sprawling developments that were approved more than a decade ago and still threaten this landscape, added Josh Garfinkel, senior campaigner at Earthroots. Our groups are working with community members to make sure a strong grassroots voice is heard throughout the review.

Joyce Chau, executive director of EcoSpark said: Our partnership will be active throughout the review to engage Ontarians and demonstrate the incredible public support for the moraine and Greenbelt.

In the last decade, developers have bulldozed an area of farmland larger than twice the size of the City of Ajax. That's at least 20 per cent of the farmland between Lake Ontario and the Greenbelt, said Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence.

Some municipalities are blatantly disregarding the provincial Growth Plan and continuing to sprawl.

By successfully limiting urban sprawl and directing growth to urban areas, the Greenbelt has protected Ontarians' access to local food, drinking water and natural areas. But the plans need strengthening. It shouldn't be possible to shrink the Greenbelt, or put a mega-highway on Greenbelt land.

King's Susan Swail, also of Environmental Defence, said they're pleased about Crombie's appointment.

He has shown his strength in the past as a facilitator who ensures diverse views are heard.

As the review gets under way we hope people will make an effort to attend the meetings and submit their views about how we can improve the Greenbelt, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Places to Grow Growth Plan.

Going forward, there is a need to change our growth patterns and I think we'll see that many municipalities still have a long way to go in this regard. King for instance, is still in the midst of our Official Plan review process. It is fairly evident that if we want to protect our resources like clean water, farmland and nature we are going to have to grow differently. The provincial plans require us to examine our patterns of growth. I think we'll see redevelopment in our town cores which should help local economic development efforts. But it is important to note that well designed three storey buildings can accommodate the growth targets in the smaller urban

centres.

?I think there is a growing recognition that we need to focus our infrastructure investment and future growth along transit lines, especially in our large urban growth centres like Brampton and Vaughan where there are regional transit stations and subways.? Ontario's Places to Grow Plan and Greenbelt Plan are designed to work together to stop sprawl by aligning future growth with infrastructure to reduce traffic congestion and costs and to support sustainable development. But some municipalities and developers aren't implementing growth plan targets, which keep sprawl developments from paving over farmland and nature.

Every 10 years, the province reviews these plans to see if people and nature are thriving in the Greater Golden Horseshoe or if improvements are needed.

Within the Greenbelt, natural areas and farmland are at risk. Threats include more sprawl development, as well as proposals for unnecessary infrastructure, such as the proposed GTA West mega-highway that would pave over farms and forests, contribute to poorer air quality, and generate more greenhouse gases.

Gray notes stronger policies can protect our forests, drinking water sources and farmland while encouraging the growth of healthier communities.

?We need stronger policies that align the region's growth with transit hubs to create urban centres where people actually want to live in. By directing growth to urban areas, we can create vibrant, walkable, transit-friendly communities,? Gray stressed. ?We need to strengthen the Places to Grow and Greenbelt to create this future.?

The Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation is looking forward to working with the province on the review.

?We expect our participation will be part of an open, transparent and robust process that allows for full public input,? said chair Caroline Schultz.

?The ORMF has led extensive consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, and has coordinated research on the ecological importance of the Moraine. The Foundation's Recommendations Report outlines priorities that are consistent with those of the Province, and is intended to address key issues facing the Moraine as the government begins its review of the ORMCP.?

She noted that since 2002, more than \$14.1 million of the original provincial investment, as well as an additional \$35.8 million leveraged through the ORMF's partners, has been allocated to 177 projects in the areas of land securement, land stewardship, education, research, and support for the Oak Ridges Moraine.

?We believe it is in the best interest of the Ontario Government to strengthen the ORMCP to sustain and enhance the Moraine's critical ecological and hydrological functions, and while doing so, reinforce a clear focus on the geological, ecological, recreational, social and economic attributes of the Oak Ridges Moraine as a distinct entity,? Schultz added. ?The province must ensure our hydrological and ecological resources remain protected, secured and enhanced for our future.?

The 2015 Provincial Review of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan must put the moraine first, and support by a governance model dedicated to stewardship and land securement, Schultz urged.

?A renewed provincial commitment to the moraine is a vital step to maintaining and enhancing this unique resource.?