

Groups weigh in on Greenbelt, growth report

By Mark Pavilons

Ontario has received recommendations on how to build more complete communities in the Greater Golden Horseshoe area ?

Canada's fastest-growing urban region, the province's economic engine and the home of the Greenbelt.

In the report, "Planning for Health, Prosperity and Growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe: 2015 - 2041," the Greater Golden Horseshoe is forecasted to grow by over four million more people over the next 25 years. The panel provides 87 recommendations about how to build communities in this fast-growing region with changing land use and housing needs, better access to services such as transportation, and better public spaces. The report recommends that the province grow the region in a responsible way by focusing on:

Investing in transit and infrastructure; supporting agriculture investments and viability; growing the Greenbelt; protecting the environment and natural heritage; creating jobs and responding to climate change.

The advisory panel, led by former federal Cabinet minister and former mayor of Toronto David Crombie, was asked to provide advice as part of the province's co-ordinated review of land use plans in southern Ontario. The panel's report is informed by public and stakeholder feedback from 17 town hall meetings, written submissions, research and by meetings with stakeholder groups and municipal officials.

Ontario will review the advisory panel's recommendations and seek public input on any proposed amendments to the plans in early 2016.

The panel provided advice on how to improve: the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Greenbelt Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, and the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

The number of people living in the Greater Golden Horseshoe will grow from about 9.5 million people in 2015 to 13.5 million in 2041. It is Canada's fastest-growing urban region.

The Greater Golden Horseshoe accounts for 70 per cent of Ontario's GDP.

The Greenbelt contains over 800,000 hectares of protected land which includes Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment.

"We hold a firm belief that our recommendations provide a strong foundation for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and beyond. While some of them may take longer to implement, it is essential the Province acts quickly in order to ensure the brightest future for everyone who lives and works in the region," said Crombie.

Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT) is one of several key stewards of the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt and one of their mandates is environmental preservation and conservation.

"We're pleased to see most of our key recommendations reflected in this document," said Greg Locke, CCKT chair. "The report's high-level support to curb sprawl, grow the Greenbelt, support agriculture, and address traffic congestion are all welcome to CCKT." CCKT supports the building of "complete communities," communities, which includes protecting settlement areas from expanding; supporting a greater range of housing types within settlements and overall greater intensification of development within existing settlement areas. They also favour maintaining the size and diversity of employment areas to support robust local economies.

"We're please so see support for the growth and increased protection for the Greenbelt for key watersheds and urban river valleys; management of excess soils from development sites; and for mitigating aggregate extraction balancing with its long term effects.

"We're encouraged that the Province will maximize these key positive considerations. However, we're particularly curious to see how the Province will enable more effective implementation of any revisions to the Plans."

CCKT noted the province has not released monitoring and evaluation indicators. How can the provincial agencies measure the effectiveness of the plans without this key data?

CCKT believes in maintaining and strengthening a Greenbelt policy that prevents expansions or extensions of municipal water and sewage services within settlement areas that already do not have Great Lake or Lake Simcoe based services.

"We see this as a key requirement to prevent more damaging urban sprawl," Locke said.

CCKT supports maintaining existing boundaries of settlement areas. Of late we have seen pressures within York Region to expands settlement boundaries areas of the provincial reviews. Intensification of the existing GTA urban centres with regular regional and local bus and train service should be the focus of growth, rather than new or expanded settlement areas located within the Greenbelt or Oak Ridges Moraine.

"We at CCKT are optimistic that with the Crombie Commission's findings, the province will have an excellent means with which to evaluate and improve upon the excellence of the three environmental plans for years hence."

Please visit cckt.ca for more.

The Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation (ORMF) is pleased that the report places major emphasis on the protection of water resources and natural heritage in the Greater Golden Horseshoe and specifically in the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Greenbelt Protected Countryside and the Niagara Escarpment.

The panel recommends developing a natural heritage system enhancement strategy for the four plans, including priorities and resources for securement, stewardship, restoration and enhancement of natural heritage features and functions ? all key recommendations of the ORMF in its submission to the Province. Other key recommendations call for protection of source waters and integrated watershed planning across municipalities and Conservation Authority boundaries to cover all four plan areas.

The ORMF is particularly pleased that the panel, chaired by Crombie, recommends the creation of an oversight entity, which would include the Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation, for the four provincial plans (the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Greenbelt Plan, and the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan). Among its responsibilities, this entity would oversee a funding mechanism to support grassroots efforts that contribute to the goals of the four plans.

?As a distinct and important ecological entity, the Oak Ridges Moraine requires dedicated management and a coordination body that will ensure we achieve the objectives of a strengthened Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan,? said Michael Jolliffe, provincial appointee to the ORMF board.

?The Oak Ridges Moraine should be preserved as a distinct entity with a clear focus on its unique geological, ecological, hydrological, recreational, social and economic attributes,? continued Jolliffe. ?We're very pleased that the advisory panel has recognized the Moraine's importance. Overall, many of the recommendations reflect the ORMF's input which was based on extensive research and stakeholder outreach.?