

Local land donation strengthens critical conservation network

A key piece of the Oak Ridges Moraine, surrounded by existing conservation lands has now been permanently protected by the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), with support from donors and partners, including the Government of Ontario through the Greenlands Conservation Partnership. King's Vaughan MPP Lecce helped secure over \$76,000 to protect almost 30 acres of land in the Happy Valley Forest area. King's natural heritage and character is derived from its many trails, creeks, and parks – something that must be conserved for future generations, said Stephen Lecce. I am proud to forge a partnership with the Nature Conservancy of Canada to protect the Happy Valley Forest and Oak Ridges Moraine, preserving King's natural beauty for the benefit of our children. This builds on recent investments to build new green, sport, and recreation spaces at the provincially funded King-Township Wide Recreation Centre. This project strengthens a broader network of protected lands, reinforcing a nature-based system that keeps local water clean, air fresh, and the landscape resilient for the millions of people who call the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) home. The 12-hectare property is nestled in the heart of NCC's Happy Valley Forest, a natural oasis surrounded by farmlands and rapidly expanding urban growth. Here, over 30 species at risk find sanctuary. The trees are on their way to forming an old-growth forest, a process that takes decades. The strengthened protection of the property means safeguarding nature based solutions and bolstering community resiliency, making this milestone a win worth celebrating for people and nature. Protecting land in Happy Valley Forest is a significant win for King Township and the entire region, said King's Mayor Steve Pellegrini. This conservation effort helps safeguard one of the Oak Ridges Moraine's most important natural landscapes, preserving vital forest habitat, protecting water resources, and supporting biodiversity right here in our community. Supported by the Government of Ontario through the Greenlands Conservation Partnership, this project strengthens a network of protected lands that residents and visitors can continue to enjoy through well-used public trails and access to King's unique natural heritage. Happy Valley Forest's natural 'sponge' function provides a critical service that reaches far beyond King Township. It's a powerhouse for managing water quality and quantity, absorbing rainfall and snowmelt and slowly releasing water into the watershed, reducing downstream flooding risks. This natural flood-mitigation system helps protect homes, infrastructure, and communities, while also supporting the long-term health and resilience of the region's rivers, wetlands, and aquifers. This project was also made possible thanks to the support of long-term champions of nature, Ron and Mary Tasker, in addition to support from the Government of Ontario through the Greenlands Conservation Partnership Program, administered by the Ontario Land Trust Alliance, the Regional Municipality of York and many individual supporters. The Greenlands Conservation Partnership program is the single largest provincial fund to secure private land in Ontario. This unique program, administered by the Ontario Land Trust Alliance, leverages non-governmental dollars to acquire, restore and manage privately owned natural areas such as wetlands, grasslands and forests. For every dollar of provincial funding provided, grant recipients match it with a minimum of \$2 from other conservation partners, including individual donors, foundations and other levels of government. Since 2020, the Ontario government has invested \$58 million into the program, which has helped to protect over 437,000 acres (over 177,000 hectares) of private land across the province – more than 2.75 times the size of Toronto. At a time when the GTA continues to grow and face increasing environmental pressures, protecting the region's headwaters and mature forests is essential to protecting life in southern Ontario. Caring for the Happy Valley Forest is an important piece of the puzzle, helping to maintain the natural infrastructure that supports healthy communities, cleaner water, cleaner air and flood protection for the region. Since 2001, the Nature Conservancy of Canada has been working in this area to protect the lands and waters that sustain us all. This project is the result of a collective effort and a shared commitment to both nature and people. Strengthening the protection of Happy Valley Forest is a powerful reminder of what we can achieve when people come together for nature. Thanks to the Tasker family's generosity, support from the Government of Ontario, the commitment of York Region, and our wonderful donors this property will continue to benefit both nature and people. It will protect rare interior forest and provide habitat for many species at risk, while also providing clean air and fresh water and protecting communities from flooding, said Dr. Rick Simpson, Program Director – Central Ontario West, Nature Conservancy of Canada. The property contributes to over 270 hectares of continuous protected forest habitat in Happy Valley Forest, which was historically logged. Now, it is home to one of the largest intact blocks of deciduous forest on the Oak Ridges Moraine and an old-growth forest in the making. The Happy Valley Forest is home to several salamander and bat species whose presence is an excellent indicator of a high-quality, resilient ecosystem. Happy Valley Forest is being conserved at a scale large enough to allow for interior forest habitat which is the core of a forest that provides undisturbed habitat for wildlife. While large areas of interior forest are exceedingly rare in southern Ontario,

there is over 46 hectares protected in Happy Valley Forest. NCC offers several trails in Happy Valley Forest that are open to the public, including NCC's first fully accessible trail on the Goldie Feldman Nature Reserve. By creating and implementing a visitor management plan, NCC is looking at how Happy Valley Forest can be enjoyed sustainably for generations to come. Across Canada, NCC is taking on projects like this one ? protecting the lands and waters that sustain us all. Find out how you can help at natureconservancy.ca/donate. Since 1962, the Nature Conservancy of Canada has brought people together to protect the lands and waters that sustain us all. As an environmental charity working hand in hand with communities, Indigenous Nations, governments and businesses, we deliver nature-based solutions at a scale no one else can. Our conservation work safeguards clean air and water, stores carbon and reduces the risks of floods and wildfires ? protecting our health, strengthening local economies and building more resilient communities. Together, we unlock nature's power, so life can thrive. Learn more at natureconservancy.ca.