

## McGuinty's greenbelt initiative a success

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A year ago today, the Ontario government proclaimed its ambitious scheme for a greenbelt around the Greater Toronto Area with the expectations that it would kill sprawl, set aside recreation areas and improve air quality.

The astonishing news that deserves to be reported is that these expectations have largely been fulfilled. The Ontario Greenbelt Alliance, a coalition of about six dozen environmental groups, will issue a one-year report card today that gives the Liberal government a good grade.

"On balance, the first-year experience has been a good one," said Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defence, an alliance member. "If there is any cynicism left, it is being quickly dispelled."

The scheme's boosters have some quibbles -- they say, for example, that the government left too much land available for development on the edge of Toronto. But they are delighted that the government has continued to build on the greenbelt in recent weeks by protecting the Rouge River watershed and the Boyd Conservation Area.

For a government that is battling an image of promise-breaking and having difficulty citing a signature accomplishment, the praise from groups whose critical skills are well honed must come as a relief. Consider how savagely the government was treated after it backtracked on an election promise and allowed housing to be built on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

It is even more noteworthy given the history of earlier governments that proposed to curb development around Toronto and then watched helplessly as subdivisions and shopping centres gobbled up prime agricultural and recreational land.

The greenbelt set aside 720,000 hectares (1.8 million acres) of land, stretching in a 325-kilometre arc from Niagara Falls to Peterborough, and declared them off-limits to development. The land includes 320,000 hectares (800,000 acres) in the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine that are currently protected, but it adds 400,000 hectares (one million acres) of newly protected land.

Municipal Affairs Minister John Gerretsen believes the scheme is strutting its stuff in that it's curbing urban sprawl, protecting water supplies and ensuring land for food production. "I think it's worked quite well," he said yesterday. Pending legislation, Bill 51, that authorizes changes to the land-use planning process will strengthen protection of the lands that have been set aside, he added.

The containment of urban sprawl will bring controversy, however. Before the scheme was enacted, developers argued that it would create a land shortage that would drive up prices and make unaffordable the bourgeois dream of a single-family detached house.

Land prices have soared across the GTA in the past year. Statistics from RealNet Canada Inc. show that the average price of an acre of residential land in the Peel region in 2005 was \$60,000, compared with less than \$25,000 the previous year. It's not clear, however, why this has occurred.

Neil Rodgers, president of the Urban Development Institute, believes the greenbelt intensified the challenges the property industry was facing in meeting the unceasing demand for housing in the GTA, whose population is expected to grow by four million in the next 25 years.

There are reports across the region of a decline in the number of construction starts for detached houses and an accompanying rise in prices -- 12 per cent year-over-year in December in Pickering.

Mr. Gerretsen scoffs at the suggestion that the greenbelt is responsible for this. He says he set aside about 200,000 hectares of land for future development between Toronto's boundaries and the greenbelt -- enough for the next quarter-century.

Dr. Smith is similarly dismissive of the link between rising prices and the greenbelt, noting that it takes more than a decade for raw land to blossom into a subdivision, which means that today's new houses are built on land acquired in the mid-1990s. "There is simply no evidence that [the greenbelt] has had any impact on the supply of developable land," he said.

The debate will not likely go away, but for now, the McGuinty government can take a bow for doing what other governments couldn't do.

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