

## **Curbing urban sprawl; Governments continue to encourage growth of green space but allow developers to skirt rules**

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The problem of urban sprawl resurfaced in the media again last week with the announcement of a new provincial government task force to study a greenbelt running through Hamilton and the entire Golden Horseshoe. The move follows a moratorium issued by the government in December to halt new rural-to-urban land conversion in the greenbelt study area.

For those of us working to restore Hamilton Harbour, fighting urban sprawl is always a current issue. Creating a permanent greenbelt running through our region may give us a tool to help deal with sprawl, but firm urban boundaries that do not eat up our remaining green spaces are necessary.

Green spaces are crucial elements in the Hamilton Harbour watershed. They contain creeks and streams that feed the harbour, and forests that act as natural buffers. But development in green spaces around Hamilton and Burlington has gradually reduced the number of green areas over time.

Think of the buffer this way: mass networks of tree roots act like a giant underground swath of netting that controls erosion and filters out the toxic materials we generate as an urban society. It stops silt and runoff from reaching the bay and absorbs chemicals like fertilizer and motor oil that runs off roads and parking lots across the region.

Greenbelts or corridors also allow wildlife to move freely and access creeks for drinking.

Without ample green spaces and a clean watershed, efforts to restore Hamilton Harbour won't be long lasting. We cannot keep gaining ground in our harbour cleanup work if the paving over of green space continues. Yes, we will achieve a clean harbour -- we are working on that every day -- but only to have a dysfunctional filtering system allow sediment and agricultural and toxic runoff to flow back into the harbour. It's like taking three steps forward and one back. Long-term sustainability for the harbour depends on curbing urban sprawl.

But can we really stop what we have created? Hamilton-Burlington is one of the largest urban areas in Ontario, with more than 650,000 people. Hamilton's growth rate was 4.8 per cent from 1996 to 2001. We are the fourth largest city in Ontario, only behind Toronto, Ottawa and Mississauga. Housing starts in 2002 were the highest since 1990.

Hamilton is not alone. Research by the David Suzuki Foundation found that in 20 years, Winnipeg's urban boundary quadrupled even though its population only doubled.

According to Statistics Canada, the city of Calgary is coming close to the same size as New York City's five boroughs, even though it is home to one-tenth the population.

Urban sprawl cannot continue and is not practical. Think about what it takes to build outward instead of taking advantage of the unused infrastructure we already have.

Every new business park or subdivision needs new roads, electrical lines, and sewage lines. Then we must factor in the indirect costs of tearing down forests, commuting to work, and

redirecting money away from developments in our city's core.

Taxes keep rising -- for every citizen - and services must eventually go down because our governments cannot afford new infrastructure.

Sprawl means we depend more on cars to get around, paying more to commute and increasing air pollution. Studies show a rising link between air pollution and effects on health.

The pressure on agricultural land is also enormous. Not only are we paving over precious land but developments near these areas increase land prices and property taxes for farmers, adding a financial strain that forces them to sell.

The City of Hamilton, in 1992's Vision 2020, identified urban sprawl as a current and future issue. The vision report called for the city "to curb urban sprawl and suburban encroachment onto rural and agricultural lands." But the best of intentions are usually countered by the attraction of investors and developers.

The Sustainability Indicators 2001 Report Card showed that the amount of agriculture land lost due to official plan amendments increased significantly, "away from our target of 'no loss of land.'"

The Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan -- a plan made that same year by governments, industry, citizens and organizations to clean up our harbour by the year 2015 -- recommends "firm urban boundaries to preserve rural and natural areas and encourage compact growth."

It is encouraging that Burlington Mayor Rob Maclsaac will head the new Greenbelt Task Force. Maclsaac is opposed to the mid- peninsula highway and supports the Remedial Action Plan. He also knows the lure of development, acknowledging in a recent Spectator interview that "we have our urban boundary and it is important to us, but it has been under pressure lately."

Governments at all levels must stick to goals like those in Vision 2020 and the Remedial Action Plan and strongly commit to firm boundaries. When combined with initiatives like the proposed Golden Horseshoe greenbelt, we will be creating a system for sustained environmental, personal and fiscal health.

The task force begins public consultations this spring. Among other things, they will determine which lands should be included in the greenbelt. Although the Niagara Escarpment is oddly excluded from the government's current moratorium, it is expected to be included in the greenbelt. Other areas, such as agricultural lands, should also be considered.

We need green spaces to try to maintain some balance in an industrialized region like ours, to stem the tide of pollution as our population grows. We all want Hamilton and Burlington to continue to grow, and we embraced our urban roots long ago. Now it is time we fully embrace our natural heritage -- the harbour and watershed that allowed us to build our prosperous cities.

If you want to learn more about how urban sprawl affects the watershed and our harbour, join us for our annual community workshop Saturday, March 6 with keynote speaker Shelley Petrie, from the Toronto Environment Alliance, and local officials, including Mayor Maclsaac. The alliance was consulted for Suzuki's Understanding Sprawl and Driven to Action kit. This workshop will help decision- makers and citizens learn what we can do to curb sprawl. Call us at (905) 527-7111 to register, or visit our website at [www.hamiltonharbour.ca](http://www.hamiltonharbour.ca)

Roland Weiler is president of the Bay Area Restoration Council, a community non-profit group at the centre of efforts to restore and protect the environmental health of green spaces in the

Hamilton Harbour's watershed, and harbour.

**[Illustration]**

Caption: Photo: Building municipalities outward -- as in this Great Toronto Area subdivision-- instead of taking advantage of existing infrastructure -- puts enormous demands on cities and pressures on agricultural land. Taxes rise to pay for them, and increased traffic means more air pollution.

Credit: The Hamilton Spectator

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