

Province looking to expand Greenbelt

There's good news for people who are fans of the Province's Greenbelt.

It's going to get bigger, if the government acts on the recommendations of the panel it set up.

The Province announced Tuesday it's proposing changes to the four provincial plans governing land use in the area, including the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, Greenbelt Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Niagara Escarpment Plan. The proposed changes are in response to the input received from the land Use Planning Review advisory panel, which was chaired by former Toronto David Crombie.

The proposed changes will help protect clean water in the area by adding the lands within 21 major urban river valleys to the Greenbelt, as well as setting up a process for additional expansion to the Greenbelt in the future to protect other water resources; require zoning along transit corridors to provide adequate density to support transit; establish Greenbelt-level protection for natural heritage systems, such as wetlands, woodlands and rivers, beyond the current Greenbelt, with the Province taking a lead in mapping those areas; support agricultural viability and preserve farmland by setting strict requirements for the expansion of urban areas and allowing more flexibility for agricultural use in the Greenbelt; and require municipalities to integrate climate change policies into municipal official plans and to conduct climate change vulnerability risk assessments when they are planning or replacing infrastructure.

Members of the public can comment on these proposals by filling out a survey that can be found at

<http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page14851.aspx>

They have until Sept. 30 to comment.

Reaction to the proposals started soon after the announcement was made.

"I was happy to hear that they will be harmonizing the four plans," Mayor Allan Thompson commented in a statement released by his office, adding that shows the panel was listening.

He also said he had some concerns with the intensification numbers in the report, observing it might slow greenfield development.

"I'm looking forward to reviewing it in more detail," he added.

But not all the reaction has been positive.

The Ontario Homebuilders' Association (OHBA) fears plans to increase both intensification and density requirements in the Provincial Growth Plan will mean less housing choice and higher prices for home buyers.

"This announcement means that you're going to see more intensification, more condos, less choice and higher prices," said Bryan Tuckey, president and CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD), representing the largest of OHBA's locals affected by the announcement. "The residential construction industry will adapt, as it has in the past - it is going to be the residents and new home buyers that are going to pay the price."

OHBA added that since the introduction of the Growth Plan in 2006, every housing type has seen significant price increases.

But OHBA and BILD welcomed the Province's move to require zoning along transit corridors to provide adequate density to support transit. This is something the industry associations have advocated for.

"The changes we are proposing would promote compact, vibrant communities that support jobs and public transit, and reward us with an expanded Greenbelt," commented Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Ted McMeekin. "Together, these would be major steps in boosting our economy, furthering smart, sustainable living, protecting our environment and addressing climate change."

"People want to live in well-planned areas that meet their needs in a thoughtful way," observed Natural Resources and Forestry Minister Bill Mauro. "I thank all who have taken part in this review for helping to shape the balanced changes we are now proposing and I look forward to hearing your views on the proposed changes to the plans."

"I am happy to see the province has embraced the advisory panel's recommendations to co-ordinate land use planning with transit planning and infrastructure investments," Crombie said. "The pace and growth of the Greater Golden Horseshoe could be sustained for decades to come with the adoption of the proposed land use plans."

The Ontario Greenbelt Alliance (OGA) was pleased with the plans to grow and strengthen the Greenbelt while guiding smart urban growth through strong improvements to Ontario's Growth Plan.

"Today's announcement is great news for Ontarians who care about local farms, forests and sustainable communities," said Tim Gray, executive director of Environment Defence. "We're pleased that the province is showing leadership with new protections for the Greenbelt, including sensitive water supplies and natural heritage systems, while supporting the agricultural sector and protecting farmland."

