

The movement for smart growth marks important anniversary

By Debbe Crandall
and Caroline Schultz

Saturday (April 22) marked the 15th anniversary of a bold move that signaled a sea change in the public perception of the countryside ? from an area of development-in-waiting to one where rural communities and natural functions were valued and protected.

The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, released Earth Day 2002, was the cornerstone piece in an emerging ?smart growth? movement. It is hard to believe, but just two decades ago, ideas like stopping urban sprawl and protecting water supplies were considered radical. Those of us campaigning to protect the Oak Ridges Moraine were often viewed as whackos.

While building for more than a decade, our movement solidified in February 2000, as greedy developers and the Town of Richmond Hill were set to pave over the last remaining moraine lands along Yonge Street. This sprawling development would have totally cut off the natural east-west connectivity and compromised the moraine's ecological integrity. The proposal proved to be the spark that ignited protests downstream, through communities across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). By December 2001, the Oak Ridges Moraine Act was passed through an all-party, unanimous vote in Ontario's legislature. This was the watershed moment for the movement to protect the water, nature and communities of the entire region.

Decades earlier, the movement to protect the Niagara Escarpment demonstrated the need for provincial oversight of regional planning. The iconic cliff faces and 725-kilometre continuous natural corridor of the escarpment were vulnerable to development from gravel companies. Community leaders like Lyn MacMillan and thought leaders like Len Gertler fought for escarpment protection across municipal jurisdictions. This campaign's watershed moment came as a hole was blasted through the escarpment, dubbed the ?Dufferin Gap,? which is still visible from Highway 401 when driving west through Halton. The Niagara Escarpment Plan that followed established a planning framework informed by landscape ecology ? an unheard of approach in Ontario at that point.

Building off regional approaches to planning pioneered on the Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine, came the much larger Greenbelt in 2005. The Greenbelt knit together the ecological jewels of the escarpment and the moraine, adding protection to agricultural land and a natural system of wetlands, forest and valley lands surrounding the GTA. The Greenbelt, which currently spans nearly two million acres, is an inspired vision for the region. These plans were intended to protect the region's most valuable natural and agricultural resources, and stop ever expanding urban sprawl across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. This bold vision for the region is a testament to the bold thinking of three different provincial governments and dedicated activists spanning decades. However, it is becoming painfully obvious that the bold vision of the last decades will not be enough for the decades ahead. Urban sprawl has leapt over the Greenbelt ? threatening farmland and natural lands in areas including Brant, Simcoe, Waterloo and Wellington counties. Currently, hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land that provide essential ecological services are slated to be developed over the next 20 years. Sprawl marches on.

In the same spirit and tradition that brought forward protection for the Oak Ridges Moraine, Niagara Escarpment and Greenbelt, a new wave of activists are calling for provincial intervention to protect other moraine systems across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. These lands are critical, but becoming increasingly vulnerable due to urban sprawl. Bold leadership is again needed to stop the city from gobbling up the countryside and our vital water supplies. We need a bigger and better Greenbelt.

This movement started with the first clarion call to protect the Niagara Escarpment in the 1970s, inspired the Oak Ridges Moraine warriors of the 1990s and laid the foundation for the creation of the Greenbelt in the early 2000s. As we celebrate the legacy of 15 years of Oak Ridges Moraine protection, we are urging the government to pick up the baton to plan for the future. In the coming weeks we will see whether the government will grow the Greenbelt to protect vulnerable water supplies or slow the momentum for strong landscape protection that has been building for decades.

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