

Farmers' views mixed over Greenbelt expansion into Northumberland

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NORTHUMBERLAND -- As valuable farmland gets swallowed by development, the Greenbelt expansion in Northumberland offers agricultural and environmental land protection.

But some farmers are not convinced expanding the Greenbelt in Northumberland will benefit the land.

With a long family history in Northumberland, local farmer and Northumberland Federation of Agriculture president Allan Carruthers supports protecting viable agricultural land but has concerns about expanding the Greenbelt in Northumberland.

The Greenbelt, a provincial land designation, extends across the Greater Golden Horseshoe area in southern Ontario but the protected countryside portion of the Greenbelt stops at the Durham-Northumberland border. The Greenbelt was created in 2005 with a combination of technical science, recommendations from the Greenbelt Task Force and land use planning policy analysis that identified areas for permanent protection, said Conrad Spezowka, spokesman for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs.

Northern parts of Northumberland County fall under the Greenbelt plan as part of the Oak Ridges Moraine while the south part of Northumberland is not in the Greenbelt.

While the Cobourg environmental organization, Sustainable Cobourg, is advocating for the expansion of the Greenbelt in Northumberland, local farmers are not so certain, said Mr. Carruthers. He has concerns about restrictions put on development for those in the Greenbelt and has heard other farmers express the same concerns. At the same time, he hates to see prime agricultural land paved over for development.

"I can see the merits to it (the Greenbelt) but I can see the negatives, too," he said.

While his roots are in agriculture with a family farm west of Grafton, Mr. Carruthers has concerns about rural communities such as Alnwick/Haldimand Township having the ability to increase their tax base with housing. At the same time, good agricultural land has been paved over in the development along the Hwy. 401 corridor, he noted.

"I don't like to see land paved over but on the other hand where does progress go?"

Farmland is disappearing in Ontario. In 1996, 13,879,565 acres were farmed in the province but by 2011 that number was down to 12,668,236 acres, according to statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Peter Jeffery, senior farm policy researcher for the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, estimates 350 acres of agricultural land are lost every day to development and urban sprawl.

But Mr. Jeffery finds some of the restrictions for those in the Greenbelt illogical. In particular, Mr. Jeffery points to restrictions on building. For example, if a farmer wants to build near a woodlot, there must be a 100-metre buffer. On some farms this would mean putting a building in the middle of a field, which is a waste of space, said Mr. Jeffery. A sugar shack for a maple syrup producer could not be built in the woods where it is traditionally built, he added.

"It doesn't make any sense," he said.

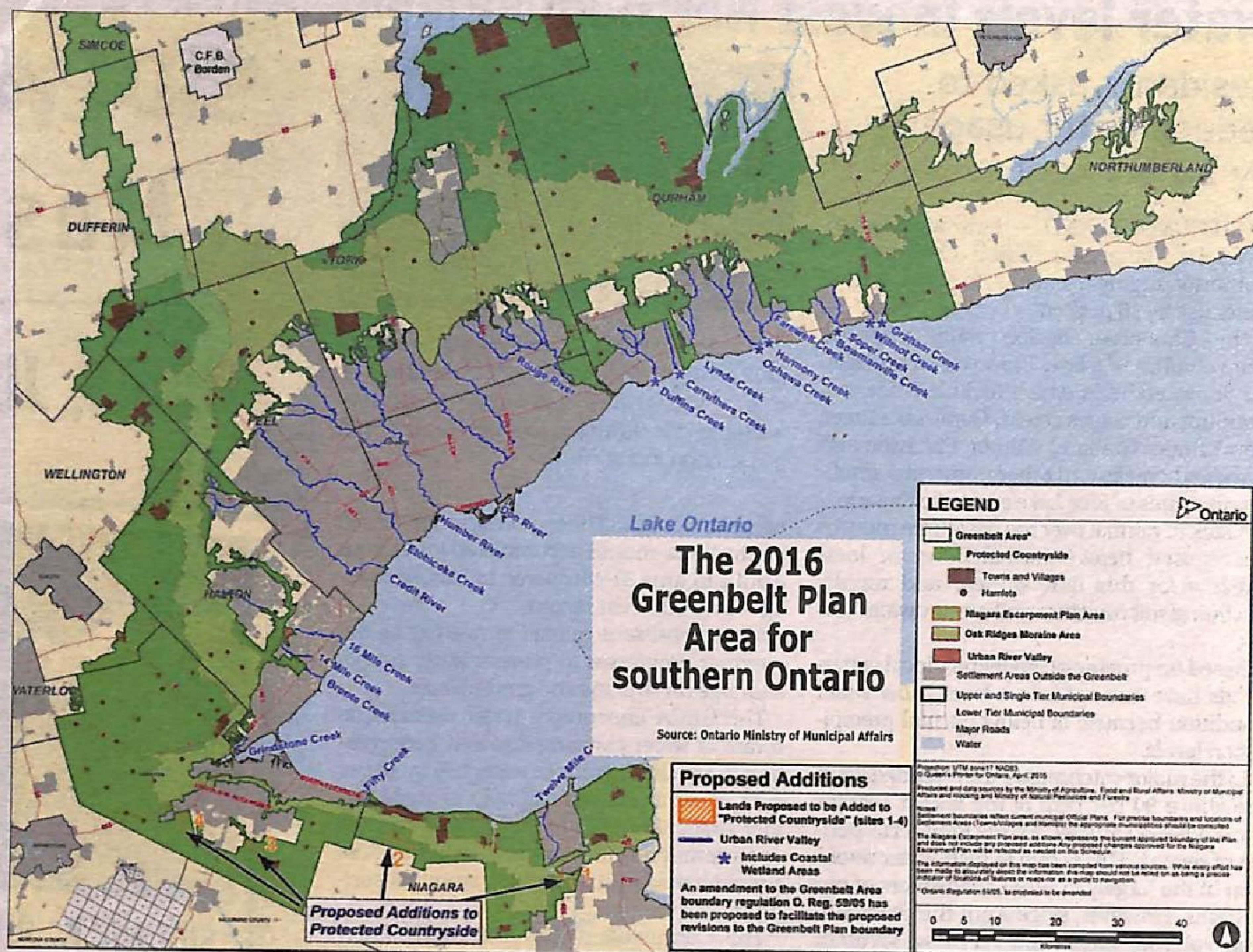
Instead of a Greenbelt designation, Mr. Jeffery said the Ontario Federation of Agriculture pushed for fixed urban boundaries and high density development to quell urban sprawl.

With the recent expansion of Hwy. 407 and Hwy. 412 in neighbouring Durham Region, Jayne Sinn, vice-president of Sustainable Cobourg, became concerned about area farmland.

"It (the expansion) cut right through the middle of farms," said Ms. Sinn.

This summer's drought conditions also highlight the need to protect the area, she added.

Deep aquifers below the ground of the Oak Ridges



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Moraine are filtered and released to more than 65 watercourses flowing north and south into Georgian Bay and lakes Simcoe, Scugog, Rice and Ontario, according to the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust.

Jane Zednik, who owns about 25 acres of land in the Garden Hill area on the Oak Ridges Moraine, has concerns about protection of this water source.

"The Oak Ridges Moraine is considered to be the rain barrel of Ontario," she said.

The land in south Northumberland County is not protected, which means there is no buffer around the Oak Ridges Moraine, said Ms. Zednik. Having the protected countryside border of the Greenbelt stop at Northumberland seems odd to Ms. Zednik.

"There is absolutely no protection," she said.

Asked why the Greenbelt border stops at Northumberland, Mr. Spezowka said the final Greenbelt area was decided after consultation and working with municipalities to confirm boundaries. The current expansion proposal from the Province does not include Northumberland and Mr. Spezowka said the proposed expansion, in the Niagara region, focuses on areas of ecological and hydrologic significance.

However the Province has begun to identify areas for inclusion in the Greenbelt outside the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area based on locations of important water features under pressure from urban growth, said Mr. Spezowka. The process of identifying lands for addition to the Greenbelt is expected by the end of this year, after provincial date is gathered and municipalities and conservation authorities are consulted, he added.

The public will then be consulted on the lands that are identified prior to any changes being made.

Members of the public are invited to share suggestions of possible areas outside the GTHA they feel should be considered for future inclusion in the Greenbelt. Comments are being accepted on the Greenbelt expansion until Sept. 30,

online at www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page14851.aspx.

With a view to protect areas around the Oak Ridges Moraine in Northumberland, Sustainable Cobourg launched a petition in February to expand the Greenbelt into Northumberland. As of early July, it had 120 signatures. The organization organized a talk, titled Farming in the Greenbelt with Wayne Caldwell, a professor in rural planning with the University of Guelph and co-author of the study, Farming in Ontario's Greenbelt: Possibility Grows Here (www.greenbelt.ca/farming_in_ontario_s_greenbelt_possibility_grows_here).

Sustainable Cobourg encourages residents to voice opinions through a province-wide movement to expand the Greenbelt at www.growourgreenbelt.ca.

FAST FACTS

Proposed changes to the Greater Golden Horseshoe area in Ontario would:

- Require the Province, in collaboration with municipalities, to identify an agriculture system for the entire Greater Golden Horseshoe that builds on the Greenbelt. Municipalities would be required to plan to protect the agricultural system's long-term viability.

- Clarify the types of uses permitted in prime agricultural areas (e.g., on-farm diversified uses such as home industries and agri-tourism) to align with the Provincial Policy Statement.

- Clarify how setbacks from natural features (e.g., streams) would apply to new or expanded buildings for agricultural uses, agricultural-related uses and on-farm diversified uses on agricultural land.

Source: The Shaping Land Use In The Greater Golden Horseshoe report from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Ministry of Housing

Websites: www.Ontario.ca/landuseplanningreview and www.sustainablecobourg.ca

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