

It's not easy being green

By DONNA DANIELLI

It has been predicted that the GTA will become the third largest urban region in North America, after New York and Los Angeles within the next fifteen years. With this Golden Horseshoe area, ranging from Niagara to Lake Scugog, expected to grow at a rate of 115,000 people per year, concerns began being raised at the provincial level about protecting green spaces within Southern Ontario. The Greenbelt Protection Act, introduced late last year, set out the ambitious goal of preserving more than 243,000 hectares of agricultural and rural land from development.

The Greenbelt Protection Act originally called for a freeze on development within the protected area, and gave the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing John Gerretsen the power to halt any Ontario Municipal Board hearings on lands in this area. The act, intended to curb urban sprawl and improve quality of life, focussed on six key issues:

- defining a system of natural heritage and hydro-geological features;
- discussing a hierarchy of environmental protections;
- protection of agricultural areas through restrictions on boundary expansions and severances in rural areas;
- identifying for permanent protection agricultural areas to function as rural economies;
- discussing the protection of valuable aggregate resources from incompatible land use, while protecting the environment and providing for rehabilitation, once a resource is depleted;
- developing a network of public open spaces showcasing cultural heritage, enhancing recreational opportunities and celebrating tourism destinations.

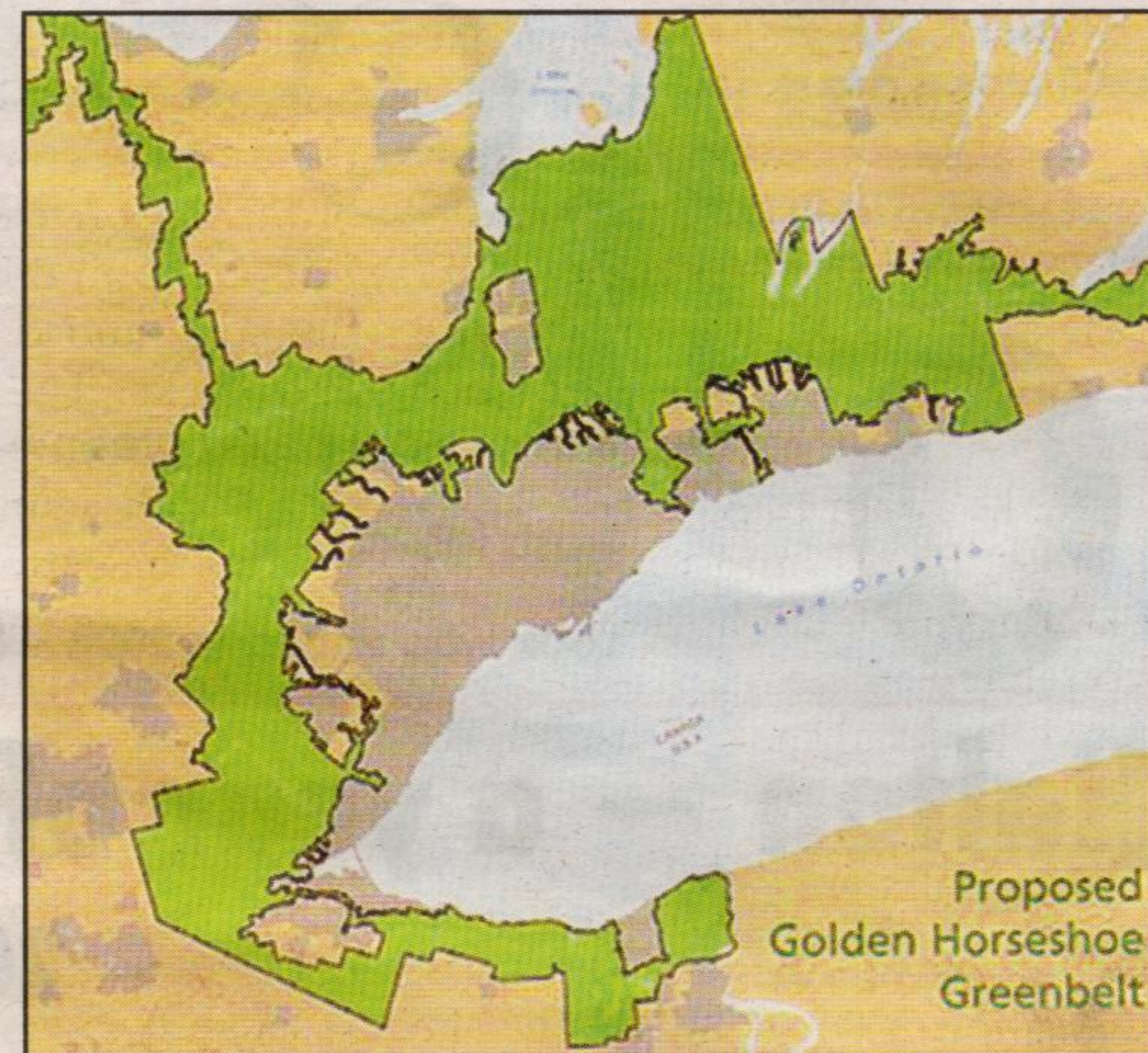
In March 2004, a Greenbelt Task Force was appointed, to conduct public consultation sessions and confer with stakeholders. The group was led by Burlington Mayor Rob MacIassac and consisted of representatives from a broad cross section of municipalities, the development industry and recreational, environmental and agricultural interests.

At the end of April, Minister Gerretsen visited Halton, for a municipal conference entitled "Bridging the Gap...Governments working together." In his keynote address on the Greenbelt, Minister Gerretsen told the assembled municipal leaders and planners that "Solutions have to come from you and I together,

to collectively create a vision for our province and the communities we live in. I look forward to putting an end to the quarrelling that has led to a patchwork of rulings throughout the Golden Horseshoe."

Milton Mayor Gord Krantz seized the opportunity to voice his concerns at the conference, asking Mayor MacIassac "Is this a freeze on municipalities being able to handle planning on their own?" Mayor MacIassac responded that "if you're talking about sub-division after sub-division, from that perspective, I guess it is a freeze." While Mayor MacIassac was adamant that "there's nothing illegal about a permanent greenbelt that's not public ownership," he was also very clear that "the Task Force recognizes that for the Greenbelt to be sustainable, there have to be a variety of uses, it can't become a large public park."

That issue of sustainability came under fire in May when the public consultations on the Greenbelt Protection Act began. While many urban residents, environmentalists and conservation authorities hailed the proposed legislature as a giant step in the right direction, farmers and rural land owners saw the Act in a different light. Compensation for the land that was to be protected became a rallying cry as farmers expressed fears of devalued land within the Greenbelt designation. Halton Region Federation of Agriculture John Opsteen argued that "If that's what's good for society, then society should front the cost. Farmers shouldn't have to foot the bill." Halton Hills farmer Bob Merry also addressed the Task Force on the issue, saying "I feel this is an expropriation of our land, an undemocratic way of taking our land and giving it to the urbanites." When questioned about the large contingency of farmers that attended every meeting to address the issues of the wealth of the environment and land values, Mayor MacIassac responded that "It would be an error to assume that the people here tonight are necessarily representative of the population as a whole." He also pointed out that many of the issues relating to the agricultural community went beyond the scope of the Task Force, which had recommended that another Task Force be created specifically to deal with those issues.



Minister Gerretsen attended the last public sessions for the year in Halton in November. They took place in Oakville and Burlington and farmers once again, took the opportunity to plead their case. "There's a significant wealth transfer from those that are greenbelted to those in urban areas," Nassagaweya farmer Lieven Gevaert argued. "Urban values will go up." Dr. Gevaert also pointed out that his land value has dropped by 30% in the past year. Many farmers took to the podium at both meetings, to ask for compensation for their devalued land but received no quarter from the government on the issue. "There will be no compensation because no rights have been taken away," responded the Minister.

It was the intention of the provincial government to pass the Greenbelt Protection Legislature on December 16. Minister Gerretsen however announced on December 8 that the final legislation on the Act would be extended until March 9, 2005. "We've heard that we need more time to get this right and we've listened," he said. "Our plan for the greenbelt will shape the way communities grow and prosper. It's about where we want Ontario to be in years to come. We're holding the future of Ontario in our hands and we're taking the time to get it right."

Halton Hills residents battle to protect their hospital

Mayor Bonnette comes out swinging

By JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Threatened with the closure of their Obstetrics/paediatrics unit at the Georgetown Hospital, many Georgetown and area residents rallied in support of keeping these units open at their local hospital this year.

As Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette noted in his *The Mayor's Column* in the May 28 issue of *The Compass*, it was time to make noise when the William Osler Health Centre (WOHC) announced its decision to close the unit in the spring. The William Osler Health Centre is an amalgamation of three hospitals that include the Georgetown Hospital Campus, the Brampton Memorial Hospital Campus, and the Etobicoke Hospital Campus.

Mayor Bonnette wrote about the relevance of the hospital to local residents and justified the importance of the hospital to a growing community that's experienced a population increase of 40 per cent over the last ten years. "I am of the firm belief that our Obstetrics/Paediatrics Unit is needed. I

have expressed my concerns in writing to the Honourable George Smitherman, Minister of Health and Long Term Care, and to Robert Bell, CEO of the William Osler Health Centre."

Mayor Bonnette took the fight right to the politicians. At the official opening of the Gellert Centre, the Mayor took the opportunity of demanding the help of Greg Sorbara, the Minister of Finance for the province. Mayor Bonnette figured, correctly, that Minister Sorbara would not be able to prevaricate on the issue if he found himself answering questions about William Osler with a Halton Compass microphone stuck in his face. In fact, after a moment of surprise, Minister Sorbara found himself pledging full support to the people of Halton Hills in their fight, and promised to intervene with Minister Smitherman on their behalf.

In June, hundreds of people demonstrated in front of Queen's Park to protest the closure of the unit. On the same day, Minister Smitherman made

some encouraging comments in the legislature. The minister noted that the WOHC was "struggling on the financial side," but he offered assurances to those protesting the closure. "I'm pleased to offer the people of Halton Hills today the commitment from this government on two fronts. First, the viability of that hospital in Halton Hills will not be put at risk by our government. When I say 'viability,' I mean that it will continue to be an important community-based acute care hospital. This government and this minister will not sign off on a plan to shut down, move or cancel obstetrics or programs at the Halton Hills hospital."

Mayor Rick Bonnette held an appreciation barbecue in early July that recognized all those who fought to keep the unit open. But he warned people then to keep their protest placards in case they might be required again.

This month, the hospital's only obstetrician, Dr. Selvara Gunaratnam, took a leave of absence. According to a

media statement issued by the William Osler Health Centre on December 14, the obstetrical service at Georgetown Hospital Campus is not closed. However, until Dr. Gunaratnam returns, WOHC has stated that patients will be redirected elsewhere.



Mayor Rick Bonnette, corners Finance Minister Greg Sorbara