

Possible Provincial Greenbelt Plan Designation for Toronto River Valleys

Date:	April 13, 2011
To:	Planning and Growth Management Committee
From:	Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning
Wards:	All wards
Reference Number:	Pg11020

SUMMARY

This report responds to a request from the Parks and Environment Committee to identify City and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) owned lands within river valley connections identified in the Provincial Greenbelt Plan that may be suitable for designation as part of the Provincial Greenbelt Plan and examine the implications for City and TRCA recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure.

The Provincial Greenbelt Plan is one of the cornerstones of growth management in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The Provincial Greenbelt Plan (2005) identifies 1.8 million acres (728,500 hectares) of land where urbanization should not occur in order to provide permanent protection to the agricultural land base and to the ecological features and functions occurring within this landscape. The Greenbelt Plan plays an essential role in protecting valuable agricultural lands and natural heritage and water resource systems for future generations in one of the fastest growing regions in North America. The Greenbelt Plan also identifies external river valley connections, which are outside the regulated area of the Greenbelt, but which provide important connections between the Greenbelt Plan's natural heritage system and Lake Ontario. The Greenbelt Plan and the Greenbelt boundary were established under the *Greenbelt Act* (2005). In 2008, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing identified criteria and a process for considering municipal requests to expand the existing Greenbelt.

City and TRCA owned lands within river valley connections located in Toronto (Don and Humber Rivers and Etobicoke and Morningside Creeks) that meet provincial criteria for growing the Greenbelt were identified and reviewed to determine the implications of

applying Greenbelt Plan policies to City and TRCA recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure. It was determined that the Greenbelt Plan policies that would apply to these lands, if they were designated as part of the Greenbelt Plan area, were designed to protect ecological features and functions that occur within the rural landscape. They were not intended to apply to river valleys that flow through urbanized areas and thus do not take into account some of the uses that must coexist within urban river valleys in Toronto. As a result, it would be inappropriate to expand the Provincial Greenbelt Plan area to include river valleys within the City of Toronto at this time.

External river valley connections are important to the long-term health of the Greenbelt's natural heritage system. The Greenbelt Plan policies that apply to these external river valley connections and the role that municipalities can play in protecting these important connections should be clarified as part of the 10 year review of the Greenbelt Plan that will take place in 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division recommends:

1. That City Council request the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to revise the Provincial Greenbelt Plan policies, as part of the 10 year review of Greenbelt Plan policy that will take place in 2015, in order to clarify how they should apply to external river valley connections and the role that municipalities can play in protecting these important connections between the Greenbelt and Lake Ontario.

Financial Impact

There are no financial impacts resulting from the adoption of this report. The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer have reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on February 22 and 23, 2010, City Council adopted the following recommendation of the Parks and Environment Committee:

1. City Council support, in principle, the addition of public lands in the Don and Humber River valleys to Ontario's Greenbelt to ensure these valuable lands are preserved and protected and accordingly direct staff, in consultation with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), to carry out the following actions required making an application to the Province of Ontario.

2. City Council direct the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division and the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, in consultation with any affected City Divisions and the TRCA to prepare a report to the Planning and Growth Management Committee that:
 - a. identifies City and TRCA owned lands that are located within river valley connections in the City of Toronto identified in the Greenbelt Plan that may be suitable for Greenbelt Plan designation; and
 - b. examines the implications of Greenbelt designation for City and TRCA recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

At its meeting on February 4, 2010, the Parks and Environment Committee had before it a report from the Chief Planner and Executive Director of City Planning and the General Manager, Parks, Forestry & Recreation.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2010/pe/bgrd/backgroundfile-26533.pdf>

The report responded to a request from the Parks and Environment Committee to:

- a) review the Humber and Don River valleys for possible Greenbelt Plan designation;
- b) consult with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority; and
- c) report back to the Parks and Environment Committee.

The report concluded that City and TRCA owned lands within the portions of the Don and Humber River valleys located in Toronto could meet Provincial criteria for growing the Greenbelt and recommended that the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division and the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, in consultation with any affected City Divisions and the TRCA, identify City and TRCA owned lands within river valleys located in Toronto that may be suitable for Provincial Greenbelt Plan designation; examine the implications of Greenbelt Plan policies for City and TRCA recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure; and prepare a report to Planning and Growth Management Committee.

The Committee also had before it a letter (January 4, 2010) from Councillor Fletcher recommending that Council support, in principle, the additional of public lands in the Don and Humber valleys to the Provincial Greenbelt Plan area. The Parks and Environment Committee adopted the report and endorsed the recommendation from Councillor Fletcher.

The Provincial Greenbelt Plan area is a broad band of permanently protected land surrounding the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Attachment 1). It encompasses 1.8 million acres (728,500 hectares) of primarily agricultural and rural lands that surround the built up

urban area. The Greenbelt Plan identifies where urbanization should not occur in order to protect the agricultural land base and the ecological features and functions occurring within this landscape. The Greenbelt Plan area includes lands within the Niagara Escarpment Plan; the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and lands referred to as Protected Countryside. The Protected Countryside is composed of an Agricultural System, a Natural System and Settlement Areas. Specific policies apply within each geographic area and general policies apply across the entire Greenbelt Plan area. Within the City of Toronto, the Rouge Valley south of Steeles Avenue is designated as Provincial Greenbelt and is part of the Greenbelt Protected Countryside.

The Greenbelt Plan also identifies a number of river valley connections outside the Greenbelt that flow through existing and approved urban areas (Attachment 1) and connect the Greenbelt Plan's natural heritage system to Lake Ontario. These external river valley connections are not within the regulated area of the Greenbelt however, the Greenbelt Plan includes policies to encourage their protection and stewardship. Four of these river valley connections flow through Toronto: the Don and Humber Rivers and Etobicoke and Morningside Creeks.

In February 2008, the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance, in consultation with other environmental groups and organizations identified areas where they thought the Greenbelt should grow in order to better protect ecological corridors and fulfill the vision of the Greenbelt Plan. External river valley connections including the Don and Humber Rivers were identified as areas where the Greenbelt should grow.

In August 2008, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing released a document outlining a process and criteria that municipalities must address in order to grow the Greenbelt within their boundaries.

Lands that are accepted for Greenbelt designation become part of the regulated area of the Greenbelt Plan and are subject to the applicable Greenbelt Plan policies. Greenbelt Plan designation is permanent. Once land is designated as Greenbelt, it can only be removed through an order of Cabinet. Decisions on planning applications within the Greenbelt Plan area must conform to the Greenbelt Plan.

COMMENTS

City Planning, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, Toronto Water and Transportation Services, together with TRCA, met with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Ministry of Natural Resources during the summer and fall of 2010 to identify lands within the Don and Humber Rivers, and Etobicoke and Morningside Creeks that are potentially suitable for Greenbelt designation and to examine the implications of applying Greenbelt Plan policies to City and TRCA recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure.

Greenbelt Plan policies were also reviewed to determine how the policies apply to river valleys that flow through Settlement Areas located within the Greenbelt Plan area as well as external river valley connections located outside the Greenbelt Plan area. Greenbelt Plan policies that apply to external river valley connections were also reviewed and compared to existing City and TRCA policies that apply to river valleys across the City of Toronto.

Identification of Potentially Suitable Lands and Applicable Greenbelt Plan Policies

Criteria were developed to identify lands within the four river valleys that are potentially suitable for Greenbelt designation. Potentially suitable lands are: owned by the City or TRCA; designated as Natural Areas in the Official Plan; part of a connected natural vegetation or hydrologic corridor, such as the river channel and adjacent riparian and other natural habitat. Lands used for active recreation such as golf courses, manicured and serviced playing fields and ski hills that are designated as Parks or Other Open Space Areas in the Official Plan were not considered suitable and do not meet criteria for growing the Greenbelt. The potentially suitable lands identified are shown in Attachment 2. Lands within Taylor Massey Creek valley were included because it is a major tributary of the Don River and includes lands that would meet the mapping criteria.

Existing recreational uses and facilities and existing infrastructure found within the potentially suitable lands were identified from 2005 ortho photos. Proposed recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure were identified from Parks, Forestry & Recreation, Toronto Water and Transportation Services capital budget and work programs.

The Greenbelt Plan was reviewed to identify applicable policies and determine the implications of applying these policies to existing and proposed uses, facilities and infrastructure. The Ministry of Natural Resources was consulted to determine which features would qualify as key natural heritage and key hydrologic features. It was determined that all of the lands under consideration would qualify as key features and would be subject to Greenbelt Plan policies concerning key natural heritage features and key hydrologic features as well as the general policies concerning recreational uses, infrastructure, existing uses and lot creation.

The results of these analyses and the implications for City and TRCA recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure located within the river valley connections are described below.

Implications for Existing and Proposed Recreational Uses and Facilities

Existing recreational uses and facilities on the lands being considered include: paved access roads, unserviced playing fields, paved parking areas, paved and unpaved trails, washroom facilities, ornamental gardens, tennis courts and a marina. Under Greenbelt Plan policies, all lawful existing uses that existed on the day the Greenbelt came into

effect are permitted anywhere within the Greenbelt. Existing City or TRCA recreational uses and facilities would be permitted to continue under existing Greenbelt Plan policies.

Under the Greenbelt Plan's natural system policies, development or site alteration is not permitted within key natural heritage features and key hydrologic features or any associated vegetation protection zones located within the natural heritage system. Exceptions include development or alteration for forest, fish and wildlife management or conservation, flood or erosion control, infrastructure, aggregates, passive recreational, agricultural, shoreline and existing uses. Small scale structures for recreational use (e.g., picnic facilities, boardwalks, docks) are permitted, provided impacts are minimized, and parks and trails uses are encouraged. There are no new active recreational uses or facilities proposed in the Parks 10 year Capital program for any of the lands shown in Attachment 2, other than small scale structures. The proposed structures are permitted under Greenbelt Plan policies.

Implications for Infrastructure

Extensive infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and sewage and water servicing, already exists within the valley corridors. Under the Greenbelt Plan's general infrastructure policies, all existing, expanded and new infrastructure is permitted subject to appropriate assessment. Planning, design and construction of new infrastructure within the Greenbelt must minimize the amount of natural heritage system traversed or occupied and minimize negative impacts and disturbance of the existing landscape, including, but not limited to impacts caused by light intrusion, noise and road salt. All existing infrastructure located on the lands being considered for possible designation as Provincial Greenbelt is consistent with the Greenbelt Plan's general infrastructure policies.

In addition to general infrastructure policies, the Greenbelt Plan also has policies that address stormwater management infrastructure. Under these policies, naturalized stormwater management ponds are permitted within major river valleys provided they are located at least 30 m away from the river channel and outside of any key natural heritage features.

The City of Toronto's Wet Weather Flow Master Plan (WWFMP) was developed and approved by City Council to mitigate impacts associated with urban runoff and improve water quality in watercourses and Lake Ontario. Naturalized storm water management ponds were identified as one of the most cost effective methods of mitigating the impacts of contaminated storm water runoff to surface waters. Naturalized storm water management ponds remove contaminants from storm water flows and also provide beneficial wetland habitat.

Five naturalized storm water management ponds have already been built on the lands shown in Attachment 2 and an additional 50 ponds are proposed on these lands over the next 25 years. The location of existing outfalls and storm sewers as well as floodplain width means that some of the proposed ponds may need to be located closer than 30 m to

the river channel or within existing natural features. While every effort is made to locate stormwater ponds away from a water course or other natural feature, it is not always possible to do so because of constraints associated with storm sewer outfall locations and valley dimensions. Under the Greenbelt Plan's storm water management policies, some of these ponds could not be built and alternative and more costly stormwater management techniques would need to be considered (e.g., underground tanks/storage) in order to achieve the same water quality improvements.

Greenbelt Plan, City and TRCA Policies Concerning River Valleys

The analysis carried out for this report indicates that if river valley corridors in Toronto were designated as Greenbelt they would be subject to Greenbelt Plan policies that were designed to apply to ecological features and functions that occur within a rural landscape. These policies would not be a good fit for urbanized river valleys in the City of Toronto which, due to their historical context and location, accommodate a variety of uses and infrastructure.

Under the Greenbelt Plan policies, Settlement Areas such as towns and villages located within the Protected Countryside are not subject to the policies of the Greenbelt Plan but continue to be governed by their Official Plans and related programs or initiatives, with one exception as described below. It would therefore be inconsistent to apply Greenbelt Plan policies to river valleys that flow through urban areas located outside the Greenbelt Plan area when these same policies do not apply to river valleys that flow through towns and villages located within the Greenbelt.

In addition to policies that protect the Greenbelt natural system, the Greenbelt Plan also contains policies that encourage Municipalities and Conservation Authorities to undertake stewardship, remediation and appropriate park and trail initiatives within the external river valley connections in order to maintain and enhance their ecological features and functions. Municipalities located within the Greenbelt are required to apply these external connections policies. However it is not clear whether municipalities located outside the Greenbelt are subject to the same policies because external river valley connections are located outside the Greenbelt Plan regulated area. As a result, both the role and the nature of protection for external river valley connections remain unclear at this time.

Attachment 3 compares the Greenbelt Plan external connections policies to existing City and TRCA policies, regulations and programs that apply to river valley corridors within Toronto. The comparison demonstrates that existing City and TRCA policies, regulations and programs meet or exceed the Greenbelt Plan policies for external river valley connections.

10 Year Greenbelt Plan Review

The *Greenbelt Act* requires a comprehensive policy review of the Greenbelt Plan every 10 years. The first 10 year review is to take place by 2015. The purpose of the review is

to assess the effectiveness of policies contained in the Plan and make amendments, if appropriate, to update or include new information or improve the effectiveness and/or relevance of the Plan's policies.

External river valley connections that connect the Greenbelt to Lake Ontario are important to the long term health of the Greenbelt Plan's natural system. Lands within these connections could meet criteria for growing the Greenbelt. However, the review carried out for this report demonstrates that it would not be appropriate to designate City and TRCA owned lands within river valley connections as Provincial Greenbelt because the key feature policies that would apply were not designed for urban river valleys and do not apply to river valleys that flow through Settlement Areas located within the Greenbelt. It is unclear what role municipalities should play in protecting external river valley connections and whether Greenbelt Plan policies for river valley connections apply to external river valleys located outside the Greenbelt.

As part of the 10 year review of the Greenbelt Plan, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing should clarify the Greenbelt Plan policies that apply to external river valley connections and the role that municipalities can play in protecting these important connections between the Greenbelt and Lake Ontario

Official Plan and Greenbelt Conformity

Under section 5.3 of the Greenbelt Plan, municipalities are required to amend their Official Plans to conform to the Greenbelt Plan by including policies that reflect the requirements of the Greenbelt Plan and a map showing the boundaries of the Greenbelt Plan area, the Protected Countryside and the Natural Heritage System.

The City of Toronto's Official Plan was adopted in 2002 before the Greenbelt Plan was enacted. As a result, the Official Plan will need to be amended to conform to the existing Greenbelt Plan. At that time, consideration could be given to recognizing the Don and Humber Rivers and Etobicoke and Morningside Creeks as Greenbelt river valley connections in the Official Plan. This action would not make these river valleys part of the Greenbelt Plan area but would recognize their importance as connections between the Greenbelt Plan's natural heritage system and Lake Ontario.

Conclusions

The Greenbelt Plan is one of the cornerstones of growth management in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. It identifies where urbanization should not occur in order to provide permanent protection to the agricultural land base and to the ecological features and functions occurring within this landscape. The Greenbelt Plan plays an essential role in protecting valuable agricultural lands, natural heritage and water resource system for future generations in one of the fastest growing regions in North America.

External river valley connections are important to the long term health of the Greenbelt's natural system. However, at this time it would be inappropriate to designate river valley

connections within the City of Toronto as provincial Greenbelt. The Greenbelt Plan policies that apply to external river valley connections and the role that municipalities can play in protecting these important connections should be clarified as part of the 10 year review of the Greenbelt Plan in 2015.

This report has been prepared in consultation with the General Manager of Parks Forestry and Recreation, the General Manager of Toronto Water, the General Manager of Transportation Services and the TRCA.

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SIGNATURE

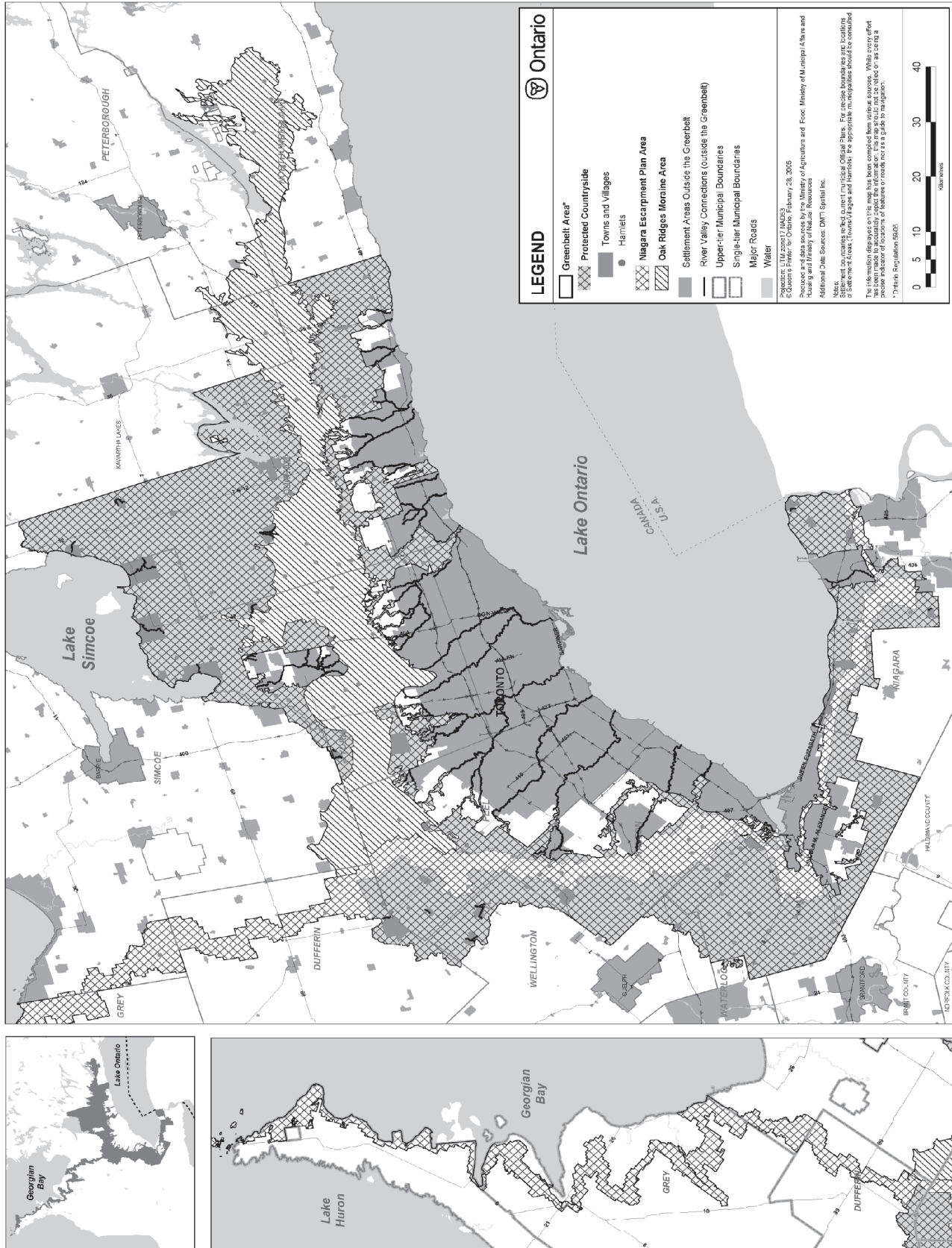
Gary Wright
Chief Planner and Executive Director
City Planning Division

ATTACHMENTS

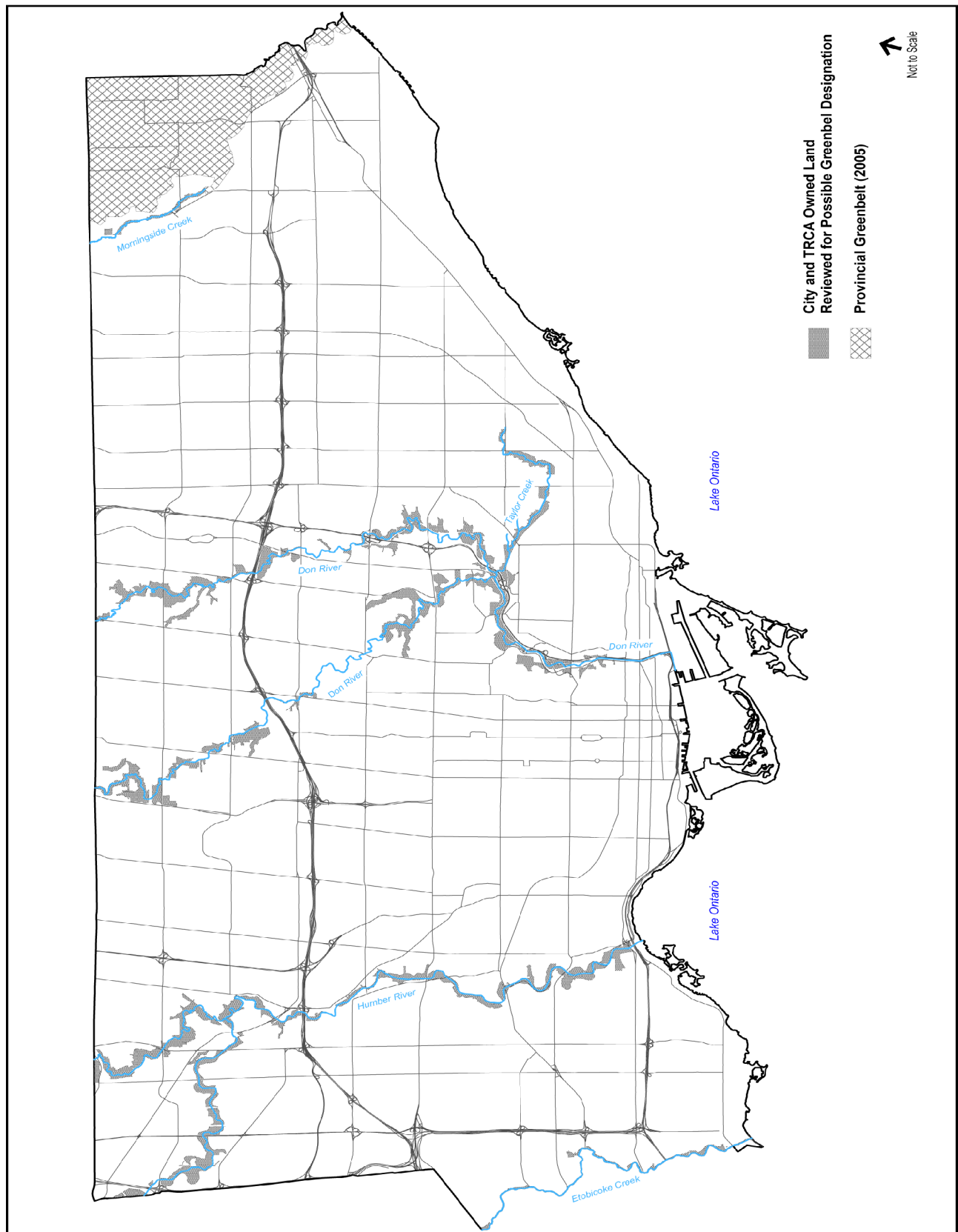
Attachment 1: Provincial Greenbelt Plan Area
Attachment 2: City and TRCA Land Reviewed for Possible Provincial Greenbelt Plan Designation
Attachment 3: Greenbelt Plan and City/TRCA Policies, Practices and Regulations Related to External River Valley Connections

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Attachment 1: Provincial Greenbelt Plan Area



Attachment 2: City and TRCA Owned Land Reviewed for Possible Provincial Greenbelt Plan Designation



Attachment 3: Greenbelt Plan and City/TRCA Policies, Practices and Regulations Related to External River Valley Connections

Greenbelt Plan Policies for External River Valley Connections	City/TRCA Policies Practices and Regulations for River Valleys
<p>The river valleys that run through existing and approved urban areas and connect the Greenbelt to inland lakes and the Great lakes are a key component of the long-term health of the Natural System. In recognition of the function of the urban river valleys, municipalities and conservation authorities should:</p> <p>Continue with stewardship, remediation and appropriate park and trail initiatives which maintain and, to the extent possible, enhance the ecological features and functions found within these valley systems;</p>	<p>Official Plan recognizes importance of river valleys as regional connections. The Official Plan natural heritage system includes river valleys. Official Plan policies protect the valley landform, natural features and functions, and encourage stewardship.</p> <p>The Ravine and Natural Feature Protection Bylaw encourages stewardship by regulating removal of trees and changes to grade.</p> <p>Parks, Forestry & Recreation and TRCA undertake a wide range of stewardship activities within the valley systems, often in partnerships with others, including control of invasive species in ravines and woodlands; naturalization programs; tree planting events; ecological enhancement of existing habitats; creation of new habitats, and stream restoration.</p> <p>Appropriate recreational trails and uses are encouraged and are designed and managed to minimize impacts on natural features and landforms</p>
<p>In considering land conversions or redevelopments in or abutting an urban river valley, strive for planning approaches that:</p> <p>a) Establish or increase the extent or width of vegetation protection zones in natural self-sustaining vegetation, especially in the most ecologically sensitive areas (i.e. near the stream and below the stable top of bank);</p> <p>b) Increase or improve fish habitat in streams including restoring or increasing adjacent riparian lands;</p> <p>c) Include landscaping and habitat restoration that increases the ability of native plants and</p>	<p>a) New development is not permitted within floodplain or the valley land form (some exceptions) and new development on adjacent tableland is required to be set back 10 m from stable top of bank.</p> <p>Buffer areas are required to be identified in impact studies for any new development in or adjacent to valley lands.</p> <p>Restoration and planting plans are secured for any development in or near the valleys/ravines.</p> <p>Regulation 166/06 permits are issued by TRCA to ensure valley lands are protected, buffered and enhanced where possible, during the development</p>

<p>animals to use valley systems as both wildlife habitat and movement corridors; and</p> <p>d) Seek to avoid, minimize and/or mitigate impacts associated with the quality and quantity of urban run-off into the valley systems.</p>	<p>process.</p> <p>b) TRCA and Toronto Water undertake programs to improve fish habitat in streams and adjacent riparian lands.</p> <p>c) Ravine restoration plans are required to include native plants. Toronto Green Standard requires that any plants adjacent to valley lands be native.</p> <p>Habitat restoration projects include enhancing the use of natural areas by migratory birds and restoring wetland areas.</p> <p>d) Toronto Green Standard and WWFMP require all new development to meet storm water quality and quantity management objectives.</p> <p>Naturalized storm water management ponds are used to mitigate impacts associated with storm sewers that discharge in the valley.</p>
<p>Integrate watershed planning and management approaches for lands both within and beyond the Greenbelt.</p>	<p>Since 2007, TRCA, in partnership with municipalities, has completed updates to watershed plans for the Rouge, Don and Humber River watersheds (Etobicoke Creek plan in progress), with the intent of providing environmental policy direction to update municipal official plans and restoration program priorities and budgets.</p> <p>City of Toronto Official Plan policies and watershed plan recommendations are consistent.</p>
<p>In addition to the urban river valleys, portions of the former Lake Iroquois shoreline, particularly within Durham Region, traverse existing or approved urban areas. Municipalities should consider planning, design and construction practices that maintain or enhance the size, diversity and connectivity of key natural heritage features and key hydrologic features and functions of those portions of the Lake Iroquois shoreline within their approved urban boundaries.</p>	<p>Portions of the former Lake Iroquois shoreline within the City of Toronto are identified as part of the natural heritage system; are subject to an impact evaluation and are regulated under the Ravine and Natural Feature Protection Bylaw.</p>