



## STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

### Possible Greenbelt Designation for Humber and Don River Valleys

<b>Date:</b>	January 15, 2010
<b>To:</b>	Parks and Environment Committee
<b>From:</b>	Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division and General Manager, Parks, Forestry
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	

#### SUMMARY

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This report responds to a request from the Parks and Environment Committee to review the Don and Humber River valleys for possible Greenbelt designation.

The Greenbelt is an area of 1.8 million acres of agricultural, rural and environmentally sensitive lands around the Greater Golden Horseshoe which are permanently protected from urban development. Within the City of Toronto the Rouge Valley south of Steeles Avenue is designated as Greenbelt. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing has developed criteria to be used to consider municipal requests to expand the Greenbelt. This report provides background information, examines how the lands within the Don and Humber River valleys might meet the Greenbelt expansion criteria and provides a cursory review of implications related to Greenbelt designation of lands in river valleys that run through urban areas.

The Don and Humber Rivers originate in the Greenbelt, flow southward through the urban area and connect the Greenbelt to Lake Ontario. Lands within these river corridors could meet the Greenbelt expansion criteria and qualify as part of the Greenbelt Natural System. Greenbelt designation would provide permanent protection to natural heritage and hydrologic features and would formally recognize important ecological, economic and social connections between the Oak Ridges Moraine and Lake Ontario, and between rural Greenbelt communities and the City of Toronto.

Greenbelt designation is permanent. Only the Lieutenant Governor, on the recommendation of Cabinet can approve amendments. Decisions on planning applications within the Greenbelt area must conform to the Greenbelt Plan. Greenbelt

policies concerning protection of natural features are consistent with but go beyond Official Plan policies and may have implications for other existing and future uses. Existing uses would be allowed to continue, however expansions and new uses would be subject to the applicable Greenbelt Plan policies. For these reasons it is important to understand how existing and planned uses, facilities and infrastructure may be affected by Greenbelt designation.

The Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), in its October 6, 2009 letter to the Parks and Environment Committee, recommended that Greenbelt designation be considered for City and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) owned lands located in the Don and Humber River valleys. The Don and Humber Rivers along with Etobicoke and Morningside Creeks are identified as river valley connections in the Greenbelt Plan. River valley connections provide important links between the Greenbelt Natural System and other broader scale natural systems such as Lake Ontario but are not part of the Greenbelt Plan area. City and TRCA owned lands within these river valley connections contain high concentrations of natural and hydrologic features, as well as areas that are being and will be restored, and may be suitable for Greenbelt designation. However, these lands also contain public parks, active recreation uses and facilities, some of which may not be suitable for Greenbelt designation.

In order to better understand the implications of Greenbelt designation, it is recommended that potentially suitable lands owned by the City and the TRCA within river valley connections identified in the Greenbelt Plan, be identified and that the implications of Greenbelt Plan policies for City and TRCA uses, facilities and infrastructure on these lands be examined.

The TRCA was consulted in the preparation of this report.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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### **The Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division and the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation recommend:**

1. 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 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 designation; and
  - b. examines the implications of Greenbelt designation for City and TRCA recreational uses, facilities and infrastructure.

## **Financial Impact**

There are no financial impacts resulting from the adoption of this report. Any future operating impacts will be identified in subsequent reports.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

At its meeting on October 15, 2009, the Parks and Environment Committee requested the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to:

- a) review the Humber and Don River Valleys for possible Ontario Greenbelt designation;
- b) consult with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority; and
- c) report back to the Parks and Environmental Committee further on this matter.

(Committee decision – item PE26.4:)

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2009/pe/decisions/2009-10-15-pe26-ds.htm>

## **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

At its meeting on October 15, 2009, the Parks and Environment Committee had before it a letter from Councillor Paula Fletcher dated October 6, 2009. The letter requested that the General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation, in consultation with the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division examine the feasibility and implications of having the Don and Humber River valleys designated as part of the Greenbelt. The Committee also had before it a letter of support for the concept of growing the Greenbelt along the Don and Humber River valley corridors from the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), dated October 6, 2009.

The Greenbelt Plan and the Greenbelt boundary were established under the Greenbelt Act (2005). The Greenbelt protects 1.8 million acres of agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands around the Greater Golden Horseshoe by identifying areas where urban development should not occur. Within the City of Toronto, the Rouge Valley south of Steeles Avenue is designated as part of the Greenbelt. In 2008, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) released “Growing the Greenbelt” which outlines a process and criteria by which the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing will consider municipal requests to expand the existing Greenbelt. The Greenbelt Plan and “Growing the Greenbelt” are available through the link:

<http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page187.aspx>.

In 2008, the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance, in consultation with other environmental groups and organizations, identified areas where the Greenbelt should grow in order to better protect ecological corridors and fulfill the vision of the Greenbelt Plan. The Don and

Humber River valleys were among the areas identified in these consultations. February 2010 is the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Greenbelt. In anticipation of this anniversary, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), Environmental Defence and the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance have contacted a number of municipalities about the possibility of expanding the Greenbelt as a way to celebrate this anniversary.

This report reviews whether lands within the Don and Humber River valleys could meet the Greenbelt expansion criteria and provides a cursory examination of the potential implications of Greenbelt designation.

## **COMMENTS**

### **Context**

The City of Toronto Official Plan recognizes that Toronto is part of a larger biophysical region that includes the Greenbelt area and that the quality of life in Toronto is integrally connected to this larger region. Policies in the Official Plan state that Toronto will work with neighbouring municipalities and the Province of Ontario to address mutual challenges and develop a framework for dealing with growth across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) which protects, enhances and restores the region's system of green spaces and natural heritage features, the natural ecosystem and the natural corridors that connect these features and protect the region's prime agricultural land. City Council has previously indicated its support for the Greenbelt. Consideration of growing the Greenbelt along the Don and Humber River valleys is consistent with these policies.

Toronto is part of one of the fastest growing regions in North America. The provincial Greenbelt Plan (2005) together with the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006) identifies where and how the region should grow and what features should be protected. The Greenbelt Plan identifies where urbanization should not occur in order to provide permanent protection to important agricultural lands and ecological features and functions. The Greenbelt Plan area is shown in Attachment #1, Figure 1. It includes lands within three geographic areas: the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan Area and the Protected Countryside. Within the Protected Countryside there are three policy areas that are spatially based: an Agricultural System, a Natural System and Settlement Areas.

Within the City of Toronto, the lower portion of the Rouge Valley between Steeles Avenue and Lake Ontario has been designated as Greenbelt. This area contains geographically extensive and important natural heritage and hydrologic systems and is also part of the Rouge Park. The Greenbelt Plan also recognizes the importance of river valleys that flow through urbanized settlement areas outside the Greenbelt and link the Greenbelt to broader scale natural heritage systems such as Lake Ontario. These "river valley connections" are shown in Attachment #1, Figure 1. Several river valley connections are located within the City of Toronto, including the Don and Humber Rivers and Etobicoke and Morningside Creeks. River valley connections are not within the

regulated boundary of the Greenbelt and are not subject to the policies of the Greenbelt Plan.

### **Greenbelt Expansion Criteria**

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) has developed a process and criteria for growing the Greenbelt. Only municipalities may make requests to expand the Greenbelt. Requests must demonstrate how each of the criteria are met and must include public consultation. Upon receiving a formal submission, the MMAH will review the submission to determine how the criteria have been addressed and may initiate a process to amend the Greenbelt Plan. Under the Greenbelt Act only the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing may propose amendments to the Plan. The Minister is required to consult with affected parties including the Greenbelt Council, affected municipalities and the public before recommending any amendments to Cabinet for approval.

Municipal requests to grow the Greenbelt are required to address six expansion criteria under the following headings:

- 1) Municipal Request
- 2) Additions to the Greenbelt
- 3) Embraces the Greenbelt Purpose
- 4) Connections to the Greenbelt System
- 5) Complements the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe
- 6) Timing and Relationship to Other Provincial Initiatives

The Greenbelt expansion criteria and a review of how the Don and Humber Rivers could meet the criteria are provided in Attachment #3, Appendix A and discussed below. The results of the review would also apply to other river valley connections located in the City of Toronto.

As a single-tier government, the City of Toronto may make a request to expand the Greenbelt through a Council resolution supported by documentation on how the criteria have been addressed and measures taken to engage the public, affected landowners, key stakeholders and public bodies.

Review of the expansion criteria indicates that lands within the Don and Humber River valleys could meet the criteria and could qualify to be designated as part of the Natural System of the Protected Countryside. The Don and Humber River valleys provide a contiguous connection between the Greenbelt and Lake Ontario.

Within the City of Toronto, the Don and Humber River valleys contain a system of natural heritage and hydrologic features and functions and linkage areas that would support the Greenbelt Natural Heritage System. Expansion of the Greenbelt into the Don and Humber River valleys would be consistent with the Greenbelt Vision of giving permanent protection to a major natural heritage and water resource system that sustains

ecological and environmental health and that forms the environmental framework around which major urbanization is organized.

Valley lands are not identified as growth areas by either the Official Plan or the Growth Plan; therefore, expansion of the Greenbelt in the Don and Humber River valleys would be consistent with the Greenbelt Plan and designation would not conflict with the Growth Plan or the Official Plan. There are no provincial initiatives that would be affected by expansion of the Greenbelt into the Don and Humber River valleys. Under the Greenbelt expansion criteria, lands which are designated for public parks and active recreation such as sports fields are not eligible for Greenbelt designation.

### **Greenbelt Expansion Process**

Under the Greenbelt expansion process, the MMAH reviews submissions to determine how the criteria have been addressed. Municipalities are encouraged to initiate early discussions with MMAH to clarify how existing Greenbelt policies would apply to the proposed expansion area. City and TRCA staff have met with staff of the MMAH to: confirm that river valley connections, such as the Don and Humber Rivers, which are identified in, but currently excluded from the Greenbelt, would be eligible for Greenbelt expansion; to confirm that lands which are not contiguous with the Greenbelt would be eligible; and to discuss how Greenbelt Plan policies would apply to river valley connections in urbanized areas. Ministry staff confirmed that lands within river valley connections would be eligible for Greenbelt expansion and indicated that other municipalities are also considering proposals to expand the Greenbelt along other river valley connections. Existing Greenbelt policies would apply to any proposed expansion area. However, given that the Greenbelt does not currently extend into existing developed urban areas, further discussions would be needed to fully understand the implications of applying these policies to multi-use river valleys that flow through existing developed urban areas.

### **Benefits of Growing the Greenbelt in Toronto**

Within the Rouge, Greenbelt designation helps provide protection of this large and important natural area from inappropriate development in and adjacent to the valley and is consistent with City and TRCA policies. Growing the Greenbelt along river valley connections, such as the Don and Humber, would bring the Greenbelt into the heart of the most urbanized area in the Region and would:

- provide permanent protection to natural heritage and hydrologic features that are located within river valley connections that link the Oak Ridges Moraine and Lake Ontario;
- connect more residents and future generations of the City of Toronto with the ecological systems of the Greenbelt, which contribute to clean water, clear air and other environmental benefits;
- increase public awareness and understanding about the interdependence between urban and rural communities;

- provide a positive endorsement about the health and status of river valleys within the City of Toronto; and
- reinforce existing Official Plan policies and land use designations and City and TRCA regulations that protect these valley corridors from inappropriate development.

### **Implications of Greenbelt Designation**

Greenbelt designation is permanent. The Greenbelt limit is a permanent, surveyed boundary. Once lands are included in the Greenbelt area they cannot be removed. Amendments to the Greenbelt Plan may only be proposed by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and require the recommendation of Cabinet.

Decisions on planning applications within the Greenbelt area must conform to Greenbelt Plan policies. Municipal Official Plans are required to contain policies that conform to the requirements of the Greenbelt Plan along with a map showing the boundaries of the Greenbelt Area, the Protected Countryside and the Natural Heritage System.

The Greenbelt Plan policies were primarily designed to apply to rural and agricultural areas. Any new lands that are added to the Greenbelt, including lands within river valley connections that flow through urban areas, will be subject to the same policies. While the general intent of the Greenbelt Plan Natural Heritage System policies is consistent with Official Plan policies concerning the protection of natural areas in valley corridors, the Greenbelt Plan policies are more prescriptive and may have significant implications for multi-use urban river corridors. These policies need to be examined in more detail in order to fully understand the implications of Greenbelt designation.

Within the City, there are numerous existing recreational uses and facilities located within the river valleys. Under Greenbelt Plan policies, existing uses are allowed to continue however, future expansions to existing facilities may be limited and any new facilities may be precluded by Greenbelt Plan policies.

Greenbelt Plan policies concerning protection of key natural heritage and hydrologic features are more protective than some Official Plan policies. The Greenbelt Plan prohibits both development and site alteration in a broader list of features and specifies minimum vegetation protection zones around certain features. The implication of these policies on existing and planned uses and activities should be examined in more detail in order to understand the implications of Greenbelt designation.

Extensive transportation, sewage and water infrastructure, as well as high pressure gas lines, oil pipelines and hydro corridors traverse and run through the river valleys. The Greenbelt Plan recognizes that existing infrastructure must be maintained and that new infrastructure will be needed. Any new or expanding infrastructure must minimize the amount of natural heritage system traversed and avoid key natural heritage and hydrologic features unless need can be demonstrated and there is no reasonable alternative. The implications of these policies on existing and planned infrastructure

should be examined in more detail in order to understand the implications of Greenbelt designation.

### **Identifying Lands for Potential Greenbelt Designation**

The Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), in its October 6, 2009 letter to the Parks and Environment Committee, recommended that Greenbelt designation be considered for City and TRCA owned lands within the Don and Humber River valleys. The Don and Humber are major river valleys located within the City of Toronto which connect the Greenbelt to Lake Ontario and are identified as river valley connections in the Greenbelt Plan. The Greenbelt Plan also identifies Etobicoke and Morningside Creeks as river valley connections. Attachment #2, Figure 2 shows City and TRCA owned and operated lands within these four river valley connections. These river valley connections can meet the Greenbelt expansion criteria. They include lands which contain high concentrations of natural and hydrologic features including some of the most sensitive and/or significant natural areas found within the City (e.g., provincially significant wetlands, areas of natural and scientific interest, and local and regional environmentally significant areas) and may be suitable for Greenbelt designation. However, they also include lands which contain public parks, recreation facilities and infrastructure which may not meet Greenbelt designation criteria and may not be suitable for Greenbelt designation.

Identifying potentially suitable lands for Greenbelt expansion within river valley connections would follow the same systems-based approach that was used to identify the Natural Heritage System in the Protected Countryside of the Greenbelt. This would involve identifying properties and areas that contain natural and hydrological features, buffers and linkage areas that could collectively provide a land base and be effectively managed as part of the Greenbelt Natural Heritage System.

Some of the natural and hydrologic features found in the river valleys are located on privately owned properties that extend into the valley corridor. Private ownership is highly fragmented and virtually all of the properties are partially developed which would make the process of landowner identification, consultation and establishing Greenbelt boundaries difficult and time consuming. As a result, it is suggested that potentially suitable City and TRCA owned lands be identified and examined first.

### **Conclusions**

City and TRCA owned lands located within the Don and Humber River and Etobicoke and Morningside Creek valleys can meet Greenbelt expansion criteria and may be suitable to be designated as part of the Greenbelt Protected Countryside. Greenbelt designation would provide permanent protection to natural features and areas, and would formally recognize important ecological, economic and social connections between the Oak Ridges Moraine and Lake Ontario, and between Greenbelt communities and the City of Toronto. In order to better understand the implications related to Greenbelt designation, potentially suitable City and TRCA owned lands within these river valleys

should be identified and assessed to determine how Greenbelt Plan policies would affect existing and planned City and TRCA uses, facilities and infrastructure.

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## **SIGNATURE**

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## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment #1 – Figure 1: Greenbelt Plan Area

Attachment #2 – Figure 2: City and TRCA Owned Lands in River Valley Connections Identified in Greenbelt Plan

Attachment #3 – Appendix A – Greenbelt Expansion Criteria and Applicability to Lands in the Don and Humber River Valleys

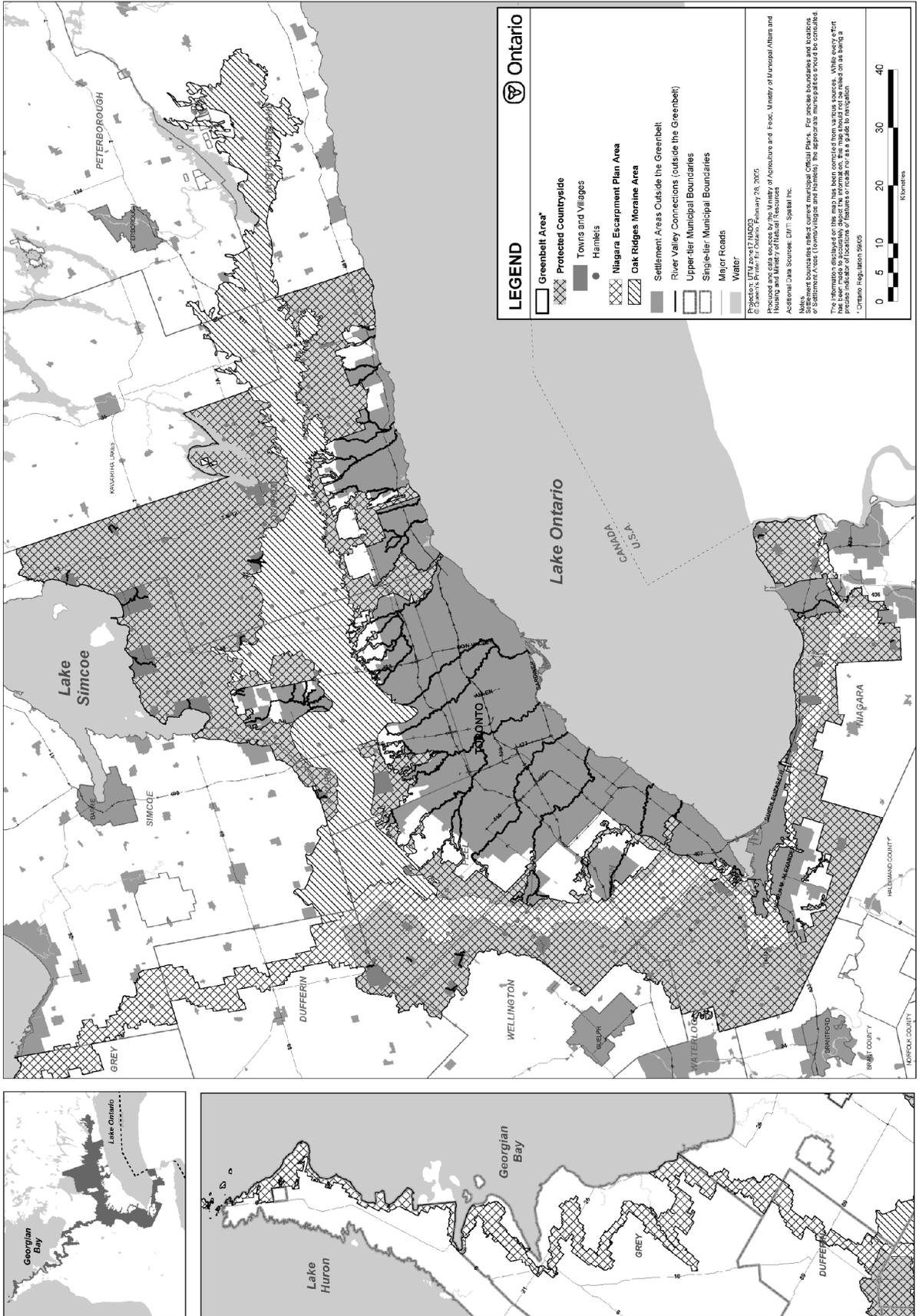


FIGURE 1: Greenbelt Plan Area

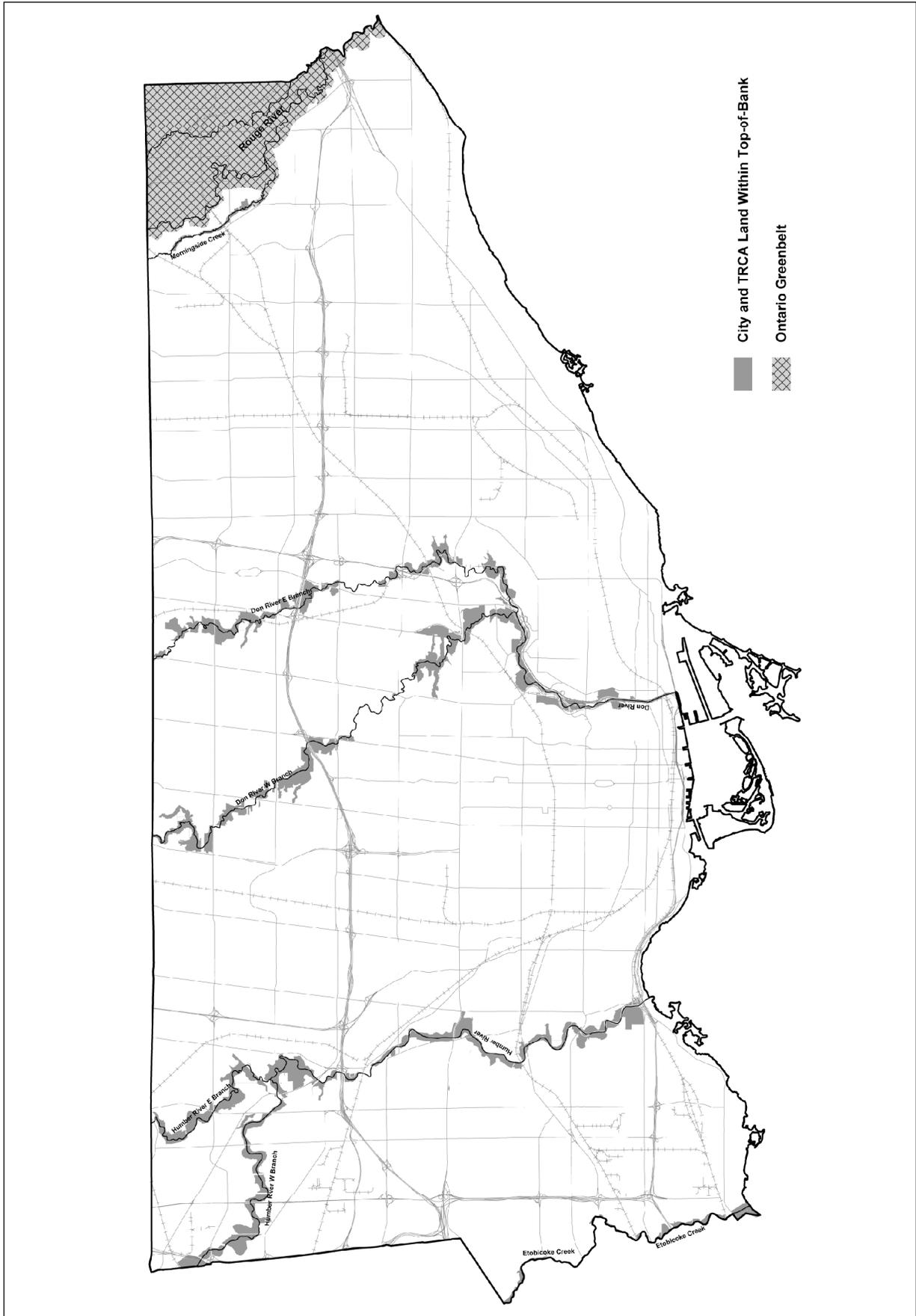


FIGURE 2: City and TRCA Owned Lands in River Valley Connections Identified in Greenbelt Plan

**APPENDIX A – GREENBELT EXPANSION CRITERIA AND APPLICABILITY TO LANDS IN THE DON AND HUMBER RIVER VALLEYS**

<b>Greenbelt Expansion Criteria</b>	<b>Applicability to lands in the Don and Humber River Valleys</b>
<p><b>1. Municipal Request</b></p> <p>The request is from a regional, county or single-tier municipal government and is supported by a council resolution.</p> <p>The municipality documents how it has addressed the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing’s expectations for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement with the public, key stakeholders, and public bodies such as conservation authorities, including notification of affected landowners.</li> <li>• Engagement with Aboriginal communities</li> </ul>	<p>The City of Toronto is a single-tier government and City Council could make a request to MMAH to expand the Greenbelt through a Council resolution.</p> <p>Consultation could be carried out with the public, affected landowners, key stakeholder organizations and public bodies. If only City and TRCA owned lands are proposed for designation the number of affected landowners is minimal. Potential stakeholder groups and affected aboriginal communities would need to be identified. Public bodies may also include adjacent municipalities.</p>
<p><b>2. Additions to the Greenbelt</b></p> <p>The request identifies a proposed expansion area that is adjacent to the Greenbelt or demonstrates a clear functional relationship to the Greenbelt area and how the Greenbelt Plan policies will apply.</p>	<p>The Don and Humber River valleys connect the Greenbelt to Lake Ontario and contain natural heritage and hydrologic features and functions that support the Greenbelt Natural Heritage System.</p> <p>The Don and Humber River valleys originate in the Oak Ridges moraine and flow south through York Region and the</p>

	<p>City of Toronto to Lake Ontario. Portions of the upper reaches of these rivers are already included in the Greenbelt. The lower portions of these river valleys that flow through urbanized areas are identified as River Valley Connections but are outside the Greenbelt.</p>
<p><b>3. Embraces the Greenbelt Purpose</b></p> <p>The request demonstrates how the proposed expansion area meets the intent of the vision and one or more of the goals of the Greenbelt Plan.</p>	<p>Greenbelt expansion into the Don and Humber River valleys would be consistent with the Greenbelt Vision of giving permanent protection to a natural heritage and water resource system that forms a framework around which major urbanization is organized.</p> <p>Greenbelt expansion would: i) be consistent with the goal of environmental protection, including protection of natural features and functions and open space connections between the Oak Ridges Moraine and Lake Ontario; and ii) support the settlement area goal of sustaining the character of the countryside and rural communities through increasing awareness and understanding of the connection between residents of the City of Toronto and neighbouring rural communities.</p>

<p><b>4. Connections to Greenbelt Systems</b></p> <p>One or more of the Greenbelt systems (Natural Heritage System, Agricultural System and Water Resource System) is identified and included in the proposed expansion area and their functional relationship to the existing Greenbelt system is demonstrated.</p>	<p>The Don and Humber River Valleys include a natural heritage system and water resource system linked together within the valley landform feature. The importance, role and key features of these systems are documented in detail in reports and plans prepared by the City and the TRCA. The Don and Humber River valleys also provide a contiguous ecological connection between the Greenbelt and Lake Ontario.</p>
<p><b>5. Complements the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe</b></p> <p>A municipality's request to expand the Greenbelt may be considered by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing while the municipality is engaged in its associated Growth Plan conformity exercise. The proposed area for expansion cannot impede the implementation of the Growth Plan. The municipality must demonstrate how the expansion area supports the goals, objectives and targets of both the Greenbelt Plan and the Growth Plan.</p> <p>Expansions to the Greenbelt will be considered for areas that are outside of existing urban settlement areas. An exception may be considered for major natural heritage systems that are located within existing urban settlement areas. The natural heritage system must be designated within the municipal official plan.</p>	<p>The Don and Humber River valleys are not identified as growth areas by the Growth Plan or by the City of Toronto Official Plan. Lands within the Don and Humber River valleys that contain the highest concentration of sensitive and/or significant natural features are designated as Natural Areas and are intended to remain primarily in a natural state which is consistent with both the Growth Plan and the Greenbelt Plan.</p> <p>The Don and Humber River valleys are located within an existing urbanized area identified in the Greenbelt Plan and the Growth Plan. These valleys are part of a major natural heritage system identified in the City of Toronto Official Plan and most of the lands containing natural features and functions are designated as Natural Areas.</p>

<p>Note: Lands proposed for designation should not include lands that are designated for public parks, or active recreation uses (e.g., sports fields) that have been approved as part of an urban community</p>	<p>Lands which are designated for active parks and other open space uses such as golf courses or public utilities could not be considered.</p>
<p><b>6. Timing and Relationship to Other Provincial Initiatives</b></p> <p>A municipality's request to expand the Greenbelt may be considered by the MMAH while complementary provincial initiatives are being developed.</p> <p>The request has to demonstrate that the proposed expansion area will not undermine provincial interests, or the planning or implementation of complementary provincial initiatives (e.g. Source Protection Plans under the Clean Water Act, 2006, Metrolinx's Regional Transportation Plan, proposed Lake Simcoe Protection Strategy.)</p>	<p>Inclusion of lands in the Don and Humber River Valleys would not undermine provincial interests or the planning or implementation of complimentary initiatives.</p>