

DATE: March 16, 2021
FILE: PGDP22 **APPROVED BY C.A.O.** _____
S.R.: 5731-21
TO: Chair and Members, CLOCA Board of Directors
FROM: Chris Jones, Director, Planning and Regulation
SUBJECT: **Provincial Consultation on Greenbelt Expansion: Opportunities in the CLOCA Watershed**

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to introduce and provide commentary in relation to a provincial consultation on potential expansion to the Greenbelt Plan Area including ecologically-based opportunities for expansion within the CLOCA Watershed.

Background

On February 17, 2021, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) posted a notice on the *Environmental Registry of Ontario* launching a consultation on expanding the size of the Greenbelt Plan Area and enhancing the ‘quality’ of the Greenbelt. Two priority areas have been identified by the ministry:

1. Lands in and around the Paris Galt Moraine, which is a physiographic area currently located outside the Greenbelt in Waterloo Region and Brant and Wellington Counties;
2. Relevant to the CLOCA Watershed: ideas for adding, expanding and further protecting Greenbelt Urban River Valleys.

Principles articulated by MMAH for potential expansions include expansions that:

- *Support existing Greenbelt Plan objectives, vision and goals* of providing permanent protection to the agricultural land base and ecological and hydrological features, areas and functions occurring on the landscape and providing for the inclusion of publicly owned lands in urban river valleys;
- *Connects physically and/or functionally to the current Greenbelt* by building upon the natural heritage, water resource and agricultural systems approach of the Greenbelt Plan and should be directly connected or have a strong functional connection to not create unconnected islands of Greenbelt land;

Comments are requested by the close of the consultation period on April 19, 2021.

Opportunities for Expansion in the CLOCA Watershed: Urban River Valleys

The Urban River Valley designation in the Greenbelt Plan is a unique designation that does not apply to rural lands but specifically for lands already designated urban by Official Plans. In the current Greenbelt Plan, the Urban River Valley has been applied to lands in watercourse Valleylands traversing urban areas that connect the Greenbelt’s protected countryside lands to the Lake Ontario and associated coastal wetlands. Within the CLOCA Watershed, Urban River Valley designations have been established for portions of the Lynde Creek in Whitby, Oshawa Creek, Farewell and Harmony Creek in Oshawa and Courtice and the Soper and Bowmanville Creeks in Bowmanville. Figure 1 below shows all of the existing Urban River Valley areas in Durham Region providing connections between the Greenbelt Protected Countryside to Lake Ontario through existing urban areas.

Figure 1: Existing Greenbelt Lands, Including Urban River Valley Lands, in Southern Durham Region



A critical element when exploring the concept of the Urban River Valley designation is the requirement that the Greenbelt policies associated with the designation *apply only to publicly owned lands*. They are therefore of no effect in regulating or controlling the environmental impact associated with existing or future development activities on privately owned lands even if those lands fall within the boundaries of the mapping. The Urban River Valley lands are often lands already designated in official plans as parks, open space, recreation, conservation and/or environmental protection. The current consultation is specifically aimed at additional Urban River Valley areas or additions to existing Urban River Valley areas in order to include additional publicly owned lands.

The Urban River Valley concept is intended to integrate the Greenbelt into urban areas that were not part of the Greenbelt's initial boundaries by promoting natural and open space lands and environmental features which assist in ecologically connecting the rest of the Greenbelt Area to Lake Ontario. Specific land use policies for these areas, which, as noted above, apply directly only to publicly owned lands, include directions related to parkland, open space and trails, infrastructure, external connections to the Greenbelt, watershed planning, environmental stewardship, and best practices for development on adjacent lands (provision of vegetation protection zones, landscaping and habitat restoration and improved stormwater management).

During the previous Coordinated Review of the provincial land use plans that took place between 2015 and 2017, CLOCA had suggested that the province make additions to the Urban River Valley Areas to the following three areas containing both publicly owned lands and Provincially Significant Coastal Wetlands:

1. Add the coastal wetland areas at the mouth of Montgomery Creek and the valleyland system north to Bloor Street in the City of Oshawa;
2. Add a connection between Second Marsh and McLaughlin Bay to the east and incorporate Darlington Provincial Park in the City of Oshawa and Municipality of Clarington;
3. Add CLOCA owned lands forming the Westside Marsh within the Bowmanville/Westside Marshes Conservation Area to the area currently designated at the Bowmanville Marsh in the Municipality of Clarington.

Attachment 1 to this Report provides detailed mapping of the previously-requested Urban River Valley expansion areas. These areas were ultimately not added by the province at the conclusion of the provincial coordinated review in spring 2017 (See Staff Report 5530-17 presented to the June 20, 2017 CLOCA Board of Director's Meeting).

Analysis and Recommendations

Include Previously Recommended Lands within Urban River Valley Designation

Since the previous CLOCA recommended Urban River Valley designations continue to meet the stated provincial principles associated with Urban River Valleys: (1) they would support existing Greenbelt Plan vision, objectives, and goals; and (2) they would connect physically and functionally to the current Greenbelt, *it is recommended that CLOCA again request that the province add these lands into the Greenbelt Plan Area through the Urban River Valley designation.*

Consider Opportunities for Wildlife Corridor Protection and Enhancement along Regional Corridors

The current consultation also provides a new opportunity to take a fresh look at the Greenbelt Plan and its operation in the CLOCA Watershed and the broader southern Durham Region/North Shore of Lake Ontario from a landscape ecology perspective. CLOCA's foundational watershed planning work has resulted in a key piece of analysis from this perspective: *Watershed Action Plan #5: Wildlife Corridor Protection & Enhancement Plan, March 2015*. This Action Plan, undertaken as part of CLOCA's watershed planning efforts, identified and evaluated wildlife corridors within the CLOCA Watershed, identified areas to improve connectivity for the movement of plants and animals across the landscape and made geographic-specific recommendations across the watershed. A specific Wildlife Habitat Network for the CLOCA Watershed was identified made up of Core Wildlife Habitat, Secondary Habitat and three scales of corridors connecting these wildlife habitats: Regional Corridors, Landscape Corridors and Local Corridors. The CLOCA Wildlife Habitat Network is shown in **Attachment 2** to this Report.

As illustrated on Attachment 2, the CLOCA Watershed contains three primary east-west Regional Wildlife Habitat Movement Corridors that connect critical core and secondary habitat patches on the landscape: (1) the Oak Ridges Moraine; (2) the Former Lake Iroquois Beach; and (3) the Lake Ontario Shoreline including a band of land 1 km inland. Of the three Regional Corridors, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and existing Greenbelt Plan Protected Countryside lands fully protect this corridor from a land use planning perspective.

The Former Lake Iroquois Beach is partially protected thanks to the Heber Down and Stephen's Gulch Conservation Areas and the Greenbelt in portions of Whitby and Clarington, however there are key gaps in eastern Whitby, Oshawa and north Courtice and Bowmanville. The current Greenbelt Plan boundaries were specifically drawn to protect portions of the Lake Iroquois Beach. However there is a gap in the Greenbelt for which the Plan makes recommendations as part of the "External Connections" Policy at section 3.2.6.3:

"... portions of the former Lake Iroquois shoreline, particularly within Durham Region, traverse existing or approved urban areas [located outside of the Greenbelt Plan Area]. Municipalities should consider planning, design and construction practices that maintain or, where possible, enhance the size, diversity, connectivity and functions of key natural heritage features, key hydrologic features and key hydrologic areas of those portions of the Lake Iroquois shoreline within their approved urban boundaries."

It is recommended that the current gap in Greenbelt Protection along the Former Lake Iroquois Beach, a regionally significant corridor for wildlife habitat and movement, be partially addressed through an Urban River Valley addition to the Greenbelt Plan to reinforce the ecological importance of publicly owned lands on this landscape.

The third east-west Regional Wildlife Movement Corridor in the CLOCA Watershed and beyond is the north shoreline of Lake Ontario. Portions of this shoreline are protected thanks to the Lynde Shores and Bowmanville Westside Marshes Conservation Areas and corresponding Greenbelt boundary and the existing Urban River Valley designations at the mouth of certain creeks, as described above, however there are several critical core wildlife habitats along the Lake Ontario shoreline that would benefit from the additional profile accorded to Urban River Valley protections in the Greenbelt Plan. These include the provincially significant wetlands at Whitby Shores, Port Whitby, the Heydenshore Park lands, Thickson's Woods, Oshawa's Pump House wetlands and associated parklands, Oshawa Lakefront Park and connections across publicly owned waterfront land in Clarington extending along Lake Ontario eastward to the Greenbelt Countryside lands east of Newcastle Village. Further, recent development proposals along the shoreline in Oshawa have raised awareness of the Lake Ontario shoreline as a critical migratory pathway for Monarch Butterflies and endangered species including Bank Swallows.

It is recommended that the value of existing publicly owned lands and the regionally significant corridor for wildlife habitat and movement along with improved connectivity to the existing Greenbelt Plan Area in the CLOCA Watershed be enhanced through an Urban River Valley designation across the entirety of the Lake Ontario Waterfront connecting and linking the Lynde Shores Conservation Area, the existing coastal wetland areas containing Urban River Valley designations and Greenbelt Lands east of the CLOCA Watershed east of Newcastle Village.

Attachment 3 to this Report shows the potential locations of the two regional wildlife corridor Urban Valley Connections at the scale of Southern Durham Region and the opportunities to improve connectivity along the Former Lake Iroquois Beach shoreline in Whitby and Oshawa and the Lake Ontario Shoreline in the context of the existing Greenbelt Plan Area boundaries.

Attachment 4 to this Report shows the potential locations of the two regional wildlife corridor Urban Valley Connections at the scale of the CLOCA Watershed along with the detailed Wildlife Habitat Network habitat patches and corridors currently located outside of the Greenbelt Plan Area. **Attachment 5** presents a simplified map illustrating the lands that are recommended for inclusion into the Greenbelt as Urban River Valley connections.

Conclusion

The current provincial consultation on growing the size of the Greenbelt provides an opportunity for key urban wildlife movement corridors and associated landscapes within the CLOCA Watershed to be added as Urban Connections to strengthen the quality of the Greenbelt as a provincial land use plan that recognizes the priceless value that natural heritage, water resources and agricultural systems play across the landscape in conserving our local and regional watershed environment.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Analysis Commentary in Staff Report 5731-21 be endorsed and submitted to the Province of Ontario and Conservation Ontario as CLOCA's comments regarding Environmental Registry Posting 019-3136; and, THAT Staff Report 5731-21 be circulated to Watershed Municipalities, Members of Provincial Parliament, Members of Parliament and adjacent Conservation Authorities for their information.

Attachment 1- CLOCA Proposed Additions to Draft Urban River Valley Areas

Attachment 2- Natural Heritage System and Wildlife Habitat Network in the CLOCA Jurisdiction

Attachment 3- Potential Urban Greenbelt Connections in Durham

Attachment 4- Potential Greenbelt Urban Wildlife Corridor Connections

Attachment 5- Recommended Greenbelt Urban Connections