

Greenbelt grade: Pretty good, but...

Environmental group rates province a `B'

But developers worry house prices will soar

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Ontario's efforts to build an urban backyard full of rich farmland, pristine natural features and wide-open countryside on the edge of Greater Toronto and Niagara rate a solid "B" from environmentalists.

But provincial plans to expand and build new highways through the area must stop, says a report card to be released today by the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance on the first anniversary of the Greenbelt Act.

In addition, key areas not included in the greenbelt last year must be added to ensure safe drinking water and to protect endangered species and natural features, says the alliance, a coalition of more than 75 organizations that wants to preserve and expand the Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt.

"This is a report card that any student would be proud to bring home to their parents," said alliance member Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defence. "But there's still plenty of room for improvement."

The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, an independent body set up by Queen's Park last June, is ready to hand out grants of up to \$500,000 to non-profit groups with plans to promote and preserve the 728,000-hectare arc of rolling green space that extends from Niagara to Peterborough. The foundation expects to grant about \$25 million over the next five years. Grant guidelines are available on the foundation's website at <http://www.ourgreenbelt.ca>

"We have spent the past couple of months meeting with stakeholders on the greenbelt and we are quite excited about some of the possibilities," said Burkhard Mausberg, of the foundation.

One of the foundation's top priorities will be to help preserve agriculture in the greenbelt by raising the profile of farmers' markets, he said.

About 40 farmers' markets operate in Greater Toronto and demand for fresh local fruits and vegetables is high, said Bob Chorney, executive director of Farmers' Markets Ontario. Chorney would like to use the foundation's money to promote the markets more aggressively.

The development industry is still wary of the greenbelt and worries that limiting urban expansion without a growth plan for the area will send housing prices through the roof.

"One year later, we are still waiting for (the provincial growth) plan, and more importantly, the infrastructure funding that needs to go with it," said Desi Auciello, president of the Greater Toronto Homebuilders Association.

"Land prices have escalated, driving up low-rise housing prices, resulting in a 10 per cent decline in sales last year," said Auciello, head of Cachet Estate Homes. "We fail to see how higher housing prices and less consumer choice is a good thing."

In its report, the Greenbelt Alliance notes several big "wins" for the environment in the past year. Just this month, the province blocked a plan by the city of Vaughan to extend Pine Valley Dr. through Boyd Park. The move protects a sensitive old-growth forest in the area. Last fall, the province passed legislation to protect the Duffins-Rouge Agricultural preserve in Pickering where the local council was pushing for residential development.

However, there have been some failures, the report says. Although Queen's Park has protected the northern tributaries of the Rouge River from development in the North Leslie area of Richmond Hill, a proposal to build 7,800 homes currently before the Ontario Municipal Board would have grave environmental consequences, the alliance says. And a planned sewer pipe expansion in the King City area continues to threaten local streams and water sources.