



What is the Ontario Greenbelt?



And why does it matter?

A 2021-2022 guide
prepared on behalf of
the Government of Ontario
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About this guide

Have you heard of the Ontario Greenbelt?

If you have, maybe you aren't sure exactly what it is, why it exists or what role it plays in the lives of people living in Southern Ontario and its lands.

You're not alone!

Many people have questions about the Greenbelt, including what you are allowed to do on it, how it might impact Indigenous Peoples and what it will look like in the future.

This guide outlines the key elements of the Ontario Greenbelt Act and Greenbelt Plan: the laws, policies and guidelines concerning land use in the Greenbelt.

Responding to common questions, this guide provides answers and additional resources to consult if you want to find out more.



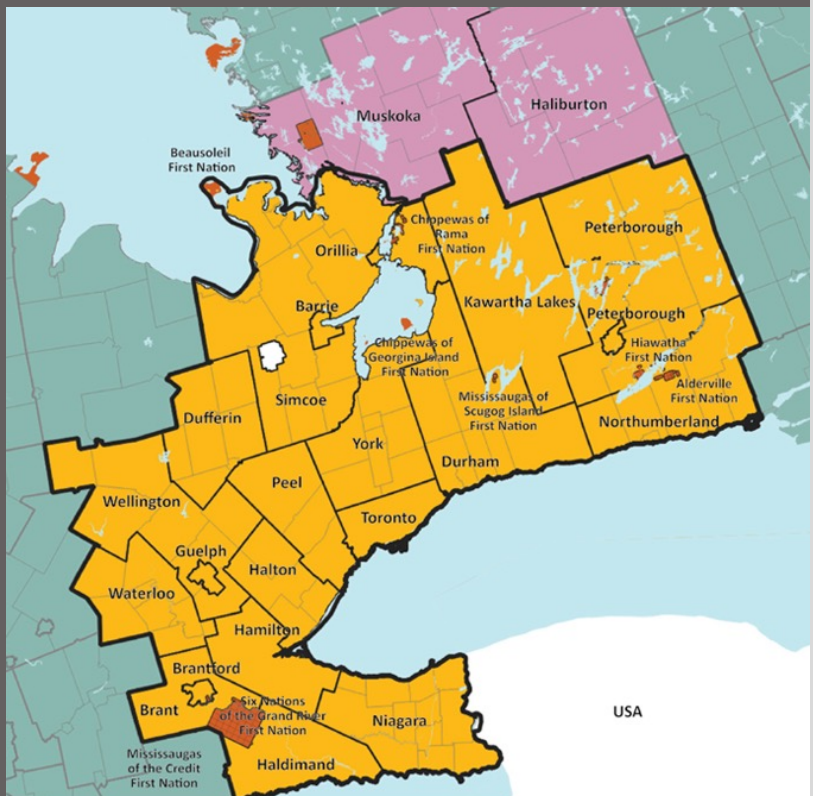
What is the Ontario Greenbelt?

The Ontario Greenbelt covers an area of over 800,000 hectares—that's about 320,000 football fields!—within Southern Ontario's Golden Horseshoe, the large area of land that wraps around the northern shore and western tip of Lake Ontario (the yellow area on the map below).

Moving east to west around Lake Ontario, the Greenbelt spans a region between the tip of the Oak Ridges Moraine (near Rice Lake, in Northumberland and Peterborough) and the Niagara River, which forms Ontario's border with the United States. North to south, at its widest point it runs from the bottom of Lake Simcoe all the way down to Lake Ontario.

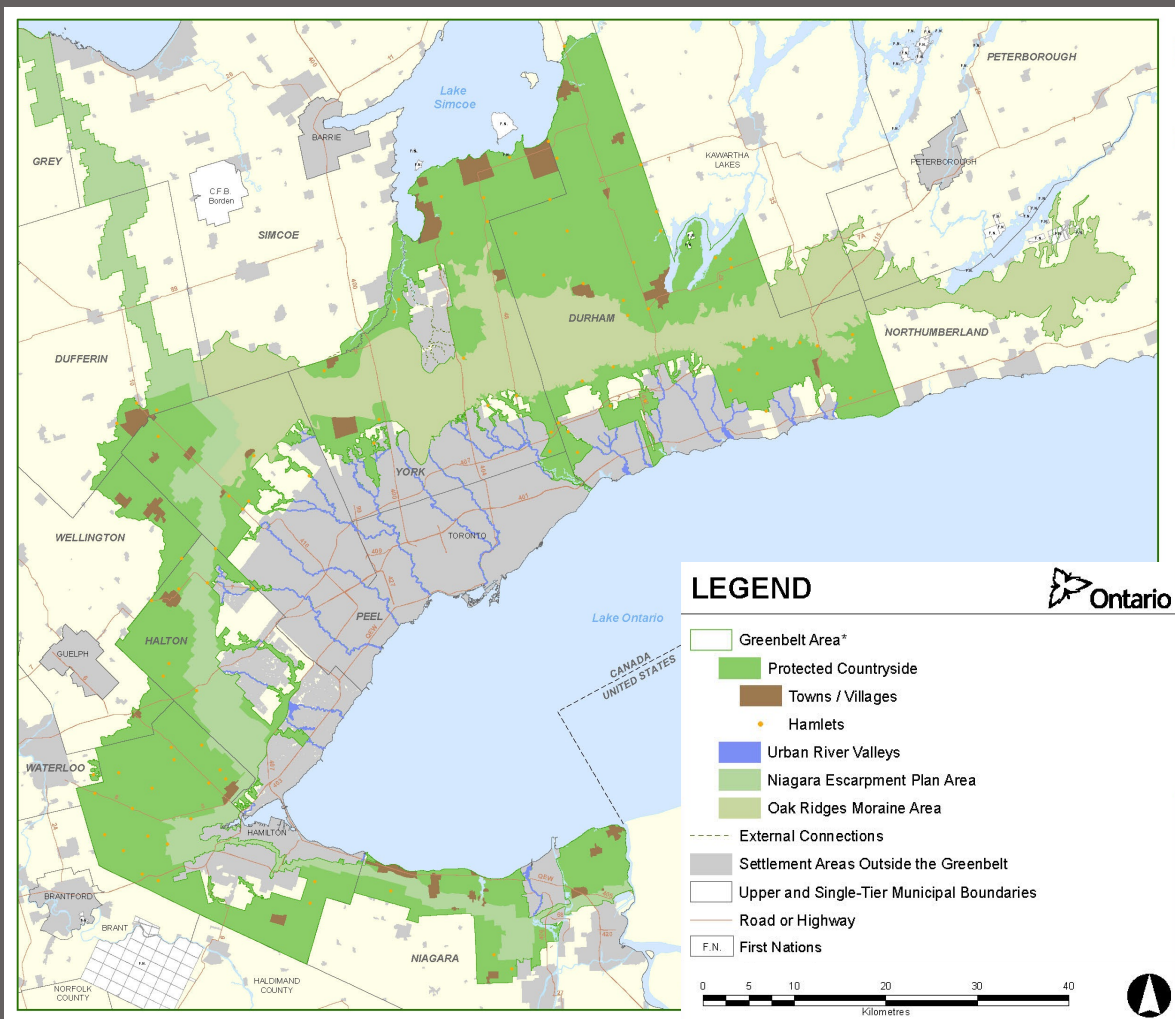


Southern Ontario's
Golden Horseshoe
(here in yellow)



Map of the Greenbelt

The Greenbelt includes parts of the Niagara Escarpment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, the Parkway Belt West, the Urban River Valley and lands designated as Protected Countryside. The Protected Countryside is divided into three types of areas: the agricultural system, settlement areas and the natural system. Take a look at the map below for a clearer view of the Greenbelt.



Why was the Greenbelt created?



The Greenbelt was created to protect Southern Ontario's environmental and cultural resources. This includes farmland, forests, wetlands, grasslands and rural and small town communities.

Ontario's Golden Horseshoe is a special environment. One of the most populated parts of Canada, it also contains agricultural and natural resources vital to the province and the country at large. So it needs to be carefully protected.

The Greenbelt was first proposed in 2003 by Ontario's then premier, Dalton McGuinty, and was officially established in 2005. But it borrows from a much earlier idea. In the 1920s, the British town planner Raymond Unwin came up with the term "Green Belt." This referred to a horizontal zone of land that acted as a protective barrier between commercial and residential areas. The same idea underpins Ontario's Greenbelt, which carefully controls development within the province's wild and agricultural lands and their surrounding communities.

What is the Greenbelt Plan?

The Greenbelt Plan is Ontario's official set of guidelines and policies for protecting the Greenbelt. Created in 2005, it is reviewed every 10 years in consultation with the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Niagara Escarpment Commission and the Greenbelt Council. The public is also invited to take part in this review.

The Greenbelt Plan aims to:

- create a network of countryside and open space areas that support conservation, social activities (like sports and recreation), tourism and cultural heritage
- protect the countryside, rural areas and small towns, and help keep farming communities in business
- preserve the land and water resources that people rely on for food, jobs and power
- protect and nurture the region's plants and wildlife
- conserve links between the region's lakes, ecosystems, provincial parks and public lands
- ensure any development in the area—like new residential and commercial construction, transportation routes and power supplies—is environmentally friendly
- promote a sustainable use of the region's resources
- make progress in the fight against climate change

The Greenbelt Plan determines:

- what the land on the Greenbelt can be used for, like new building projects, services or transportation routes
- how branches of Ontario's government coordinate their efforts concerning the Greenbelt
- the use of land and water resources in the region
- which areas should be parks or open spaces, or be used for recreation, culture or tourism
- the use of agricultural land within the Protected Countryside, to help ensure its survival
- how areas of land also covered by other policies or laws are used—if there's a conflict, the Greenbelt Plan usually has priority

. . . but there are some exceptions!



If the Greenbelt Plan conflicts with either the **Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan** or the **Niagara Escarpment Plan**, then those Plans (and their associated Acts) have the final say.

This is because the Oak Ridges Moraine and Niagara Escarpment Plans predate the Greenbelt Plan.

Who controls the Greenbelt?

The Greenbelt is controlled by two authorities within the Government of Ontario:

- the **Lieutenant Governor**
- the **Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing**

The **Lieutenant Governor** is the province's representative of Her Majesty The Queen and has both a constitutional and ceremonial role. The Lieutenant Governor works with Ontario's Premier to make sure that the province is governed properly.

The **Lieutenant Governor** can:

- decide which areas of land are part of the Greenbelt
- add new aims to the Greenbelt Plan
- create policies for the use of Greenbelt land within the Protected Countryside
- overrule policies in other Plans (such as the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan or the Niagara Escarpment Plan) to ensure the Greenbelt Plan is working



The **Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing** is responsible for all the development and use of land in the province, both in cities and rural areas. For example, they oversee building codes, protect tenants' rights, and support the construction of social housing.

The **Minister** can:

- control how cities and rural areas within the Protected Countryside create and carry out planning by-laws
- decide which items of the Greenbelt Act should be considered official instructions (except for items controlled by the Lieutenant Governor)
- suggest changes to the Greenbelt Plan

How are changes made to the Greenbelt Plan?

If the Minister decides a change is needed, they notify each group or individual who might be impacted and invite them to share their opinion (in writing and by a specific deadline).

The Minister also consults the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, the Niagara Escarpment Commission and the Greenbelt Council to confirm that everyone agrees on the change.

If the change is agreed, it's presented to the Lieutenant Governor for final approval.

If there's disagreement, a hearing may be held.

After the hearing, a written report of the outcome is given to the Minister. The Minister then submits this report to the Lieutenant Governor, who decides to approve, refuse or suggest revisions to the proposed change. A copy of this decision is then sent to everyone involved. The Lieutenant Governor's decision is final.

Any proposed changes that will reduce the total area of the Greenbelt are never approved.

What's the difference between the Greenbelt Act and the Greenbelt Plan?

Greenbelt Act	Greenbelt Plan
An Act is a law that's been officially approved and put into action by the government. In Ontario, bills (proposed laws) become Acts (laws) when they've been passed by the Legislative Assembly and given Royal Assent (approved by the Lieutenant Governor on behalf of Her Majesty The Queen).	A Plan is a document that sets out guidelines and policies to be followed and provides a framework for decision making. Plans can vary in purpose and contents, but all are intended to complement and support other government documents, including Acts and other Plans.

The **Greenbelt Plan** takes its authority from the **Greenbelt Act**: the **Act** gives the Lieutenant Governor the power to decide which areas of land are part of the Greenbelt, while the **Plan** provides guidance on how this land should be identified, classified and used.

Like other provincial Plans, the Greenbelt Plan borrows from Ontario's Provincial Policy Statement, which lays out the rules for land use and development.

Within the **Greenbelt Act** and **Greenbelt Plan** you'll also encounter the terms "undertaking" and "regulation". An "undertaking" is an enterprise, activity, proposal or program carried out by a business, government branch, individual or the Crown. A "regulation" is a rule or law made or approved by the government or a minister of the Crown.

What is the Greenbelt Council?

This group advises the government on land use within the Greenbelt. In French, this council is known as the Conseil de la ceinture de verdure. Appointed by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing for a fixed period, the members of this council meet between six and 10 times a year. They advise the Minister on three Plans related to the Greenbelt:



- Greenbelt Plan
- A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe
- Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan

Find out more about the Greenbelt Council at:
www.ontario.ca/page/greenbelt-council



What is the Greenbelt Foundation?

This is an independent, charitable organization funded by the Government of Ontario and by public and private contributions. The Foundation invests these funds—more than \$47 million since 2005—to help protect the Greenbelt's resources and support the economy at the same time.

Find out more about the Greenbelt Foundation at:
www.greenbelt.ca/about

Can I build on the Greenbelt?



The Greenbelt Plan applies to anyone who wants to build on the Greenbelt—whether that’s a council, board, independent group or individual. If you want to construct a building, do public work or renovate an existing structure on the Greenbelt, the Greenbelt Plan usually overrides any other set of laws or policies.

If there are any conflicts or disagreements, the Ontario Municipal Board makes the final decision.

This means that development on the Greenbelt is generally not allowed.

But there are exceptions: if development is considered beneficial or essential to people living in or near the Greenbelt, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing can create what’s known as an “MZO” within the area.



What are “MZOs”?

You may have come across this term in discussions about the Greenbelt.

The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing can create special zones within areas of the Greenbelt or the Protected Countryside. These zones determine how land and resources within the region are used—particularly for building or development that’s considered essential or beneficial like long-term care homes or affordable housing. These zones are known as MZOs (Minister’s Zoning Orders).

A full description of MZOs can be found in the Ontario Planning Act (Section 47) at:
www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90p13

MZOs are often the subject of debate between those who support development in the region and those who are concerned about protecting the environment.

MZOs mean that it is possible to build on Greenbelt land if the Government of Ontario considers it either essential or beneficial to communities in the area.



What about the Ontario Planning and Development Act?

The Ontario Planning and Development Act has authority over the Greenbelt Plan. Under this Act, The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing can make changes to policies concerning Greenbelt land.

For more on the Ontario Planning and Development Act, see: www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/94o23

Is my property or land on the Greenbelt?

To find out if your property or land is on the Greenbelt, contact the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. They can give you detailed advice about which policies or restrictions apply to you and your property. See page 22 of this guide for the Ministry's contact information.

The Greenbelt Act and Greenbelt Plan only apply to building and development projects begun after December 16, 2004. For full details see Section 24 of the Greenbelt Act at: www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05g01



What can I do if my application to build on the Greenbelt is rejected?

If an application to build on Greenbelt or Protected Countryside land is rejected, it can be appealed or referred to the Ontario Land Tribunal:

This Tribunal is responsible for making legal decisions about matters relating to the planning, development and protection of land within Ontario.

The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing can instruct the Tribunal to defer the matter until further notice.

Within 30 days of the Minister's deferral, the Minister can authorize a hearing, where the parties involved can make their case to the Ontario Land Tribunal. This hearing is controlled by a hearing officer. Like a judge, a hearing officer reviews and analyzes the testimonies and evidence offered during the hearing.

After the hearing, the hearing officer has 30 days to write and submit their recommended actions to the Minister. The Minister then seeks the approval of the Lieutenant Governor. (This 30-day period can be extended by the Minister at the hearing officer's request.)

The final decision rests with the Minister, who can choose to approve, change or refuse all or some of the hearing officer's recommendations. The Minister's decisions are final and cannot be further appealed.

The Greenbelt Act is protected from legal action: you cannot bring legal action against any of the Act's existing policies or future changes made to it.

Any cases that pre-date the Greenbelt Act will be dismissed, without any fees.

Note that the Statutory Powers Procedure Act, which lays out rules of procedure for most of Ontario's tribunals, doesn't apply to the Greenbelt Act.

Any regulations made or actions taken under the Greenbelt Act can't be considered expropriation (the taking of land by an authority without the owner's consent).

Does the Greenbelt work?



The Greenbelt Plan is protecting Ontario's natural resources and wildlife. It works together with other Plans and policies to establish a set of guidelines for land use that support *both* the economy and the environment.

It also works with Ontario's Climate Change Action Plan, which aims to reduce greenhouse gases by 80% by the end of 2050.

Protecting the Greenbelt means supporting both the environment and the people who rely on its resources.

The Greenbelt contains areas of manageable size, provides trails and spaces for vehicle-free activities, and supports alternative forms of transportation. All of these elements help to lower carbon emissions.

Some parts of the Protected Countryside within the Greenbelt—including agricultural land and natural areas—also provide “carbon sinks,” areas that absorb more carbon than the atmosphere releases.

Who else is protecting the Greenbelt?

Conservation authorities advise the Greenbelt Plan on any matters—such as building and development projects—that might impact conservation areas within the Greenbelt.

The Greenbelt Plan provides official guidance if a conflict arises between a conservation authority and a planning or development project.

Independent “watchdog” organizations—non-governmental groups that monitor the government to ensure they keep their promises—also contribute toward protecting the Greenbelt. One example is the Greenbelt Alliance.

What is the Greenbelt Alliance?

The Ontario Greenbelt Alliance played an important role in the creation of the Greenbelt in 2005. Its Steering Committee includes members from various environmental organizations, such as Ontario Nature, Save the Maskinonge and the Grand River Environment Network.

Their goal is to ensure that the laws of the Greenbelt Act and Greenbelt Plan are upheld. They promote the ongoing protection of the Greenbelt’s land, resources and communities.

Find out more about the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance at: greenbeltalliance.ca



What does the Greenbelt mean for Indigenous Peoples?

The Great Lakes region of the Greenbelt is home to many First Nations and Métis communities, who have a vital connection to this region's land and resources.

The Greenbelt area is covered by various Treaties that safeguard Indigenous Peoples' rights. These Treaties include the Between the Lakes Purchase (1792), the Brant Tract (1795) and the Ajetance Purchase (1818).

The Government of Ontario acknowledges the essential and ongoing role played by Indigenous Peoples in the prosperity and preservation of lands contained within the Greenbelt.

The traditional knowledge and practices of Indigenous Peoples in the Greenbelt region have also been very important to planning decisions.



For a map of the Treaties in the Greenbelt region, visit:

[www.ontario.ca/
page/map-ontario-treaties
-and-reserves](http://www.ontario.ca/page/map-ontario-treaties-and-reserves)

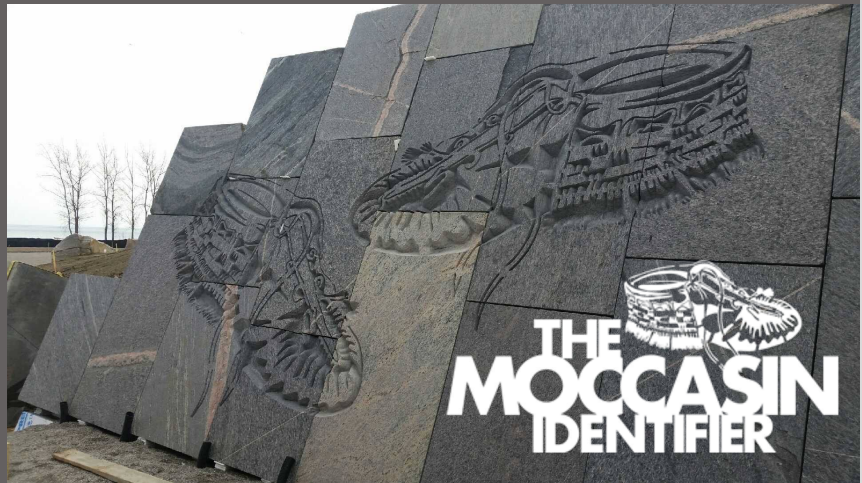
(Please note that this map is only one of many ways of interpreting and representing these Treaties.)



A project underway at Queen's University is exploring the relationship and mutual impact between Indigenous planning practices and the Government of Ontario's Greenbelt policies.

For more information, visit:

www.queensu.ca/pwip/projects/indigenous-planning-and-ontario-greenbelt-plan



The Government of Ontario also supports various Greenbelt initiatives overseen by Indigenous organizations that enforce the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

These include the Greenbelt Moccasin Identifier Program, run by the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This program is currently placing Indigenous heritage markers throughout the Greenbelt to increase the visibility of First Nations and Métis Peoples in the region and promote cultural reclamation.

Site markers—in the shape of a moccasin—are being placed in locations where Peoples from these communities have important, ancestral connections to the land.

This project is funded by a grant from the Greenbelt Foundation (see page 12 of this guide) and is sponsored by the Bata Shoe Museum.

For more information, visit: www.moccasinidentifier.com

What is the future of the Greenbelt?

Is it still expanding?

In February 2021 the Government of Ontario announced a new decision to expand the Greenbelt.

The project will be overseen by the Greenbelt Plan and the A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

It has two aims:

- To study the area of land around the Paris Galt Moraine (a water recharge area within the Grand River watershed). This runs from Caledon to Brantford and is the location of vital groundwater resources.
- To add to, expand and protect the Urban River Valleys within the Greenbelt. Some of the publicly owned lands (parks, recreation spaces and conservation areas) within these river valleys will be added to the Greenbelt.

This is just one of the ways the Government of Ontario is ensuring the long-term protection and growth of the Greenbelt for future generations.

To find out more about this project, visit:
www.ontario.ca/document/place-grow-growth-plan-greater-golden-horseshoe

Where can I learn more?

For more information about anything covered in this guide, please contact the **Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing**:

English: www.ontario.ca/page/ministry-municipal-affairs-housing

French: www.ontario.ca/fr/page/ministere-des-affaires-municipales-et-du-logement

Phone: 416-585-7041

Fax: 416-585-4230

For people with accessibility needs related to hearing:

TTY: 416-585-6991

Toll-free TTY: 1-866-220-2290

For people with other accessibility needs:

www.ontario.ca/page/accessible-customer-service-policy

Address: 777 Bay Street, 17th floor
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 2J3

Other useful resources:

Greenbelt Act: www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05g01

Greenbelt Plan: www.ontario.ca/document/greenbelt-plan-2017

Lieutenant Governor of Ontario:

English: www.lgontario.ca/en/ French: www.lgontario.ca/fr/

Phone: 416-325-7780

Greenbelt Council: www.ontario.ca/page/greenbelt-council,
www.pas.gov.on.ca/Home/Agency/539

Greenbelt Foundation: www.greenbelt.ca

Greenbelt Alliance: greenbeltalliance.ca



Sources consulted:

Ontario Greenbelt Act (2005): www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05g01

Ontario Greenbelt Plan (2017): www.ontario.ca/document/greenbelt-plan-2017

Ontario Planning and Development Act: www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/94o23

Ontario Planning Act: www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90p13

Ontario e-Laws definitions: www.ontario.ca/laws/e-laws-definitions

Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing: www.ontario.ca/page/ministry-municipal-affairs-housing

Lieutenant Governor of Ontario: www.lgontario.ca/en/

Ontario Land Tribunal: <https://olt.gov.on.ca/>

Greenbelt Council: www.ontario.ca/page/greenbelt-council, www.pas.gov.on.ca/Home/Agency/539

Greenbelt Foundation: www.greenbelt.ca

Greenbelt Alliance: <https://greenbeltalliance.ca>

Provincial Policy Statement (2020): www.ontario.ca/page/provincial-policy-statement-2020

Citizen's Guide to Land Use Planning: www.ontario.ca/document/citizens-guide-land-use-planning/official-plans

Project YU: www.projectyu.ca/greenoccasin Identifier Program: moccasinidentifier.com

Indigenous in the Greenbelt: www.alternativesjournal.ca/indigenous-in-the-greenbelt/

Treaties: www.ontario.ca/page/treaties, www.ontario.ca/page/map-ontario-treaties-and-reserves

Minister's Zoning Orders: www.amcto.com/getattachment/fd91eac4-c3ba-4e77-ad0d-256b6c2dd2dc/.aspx

Mervyn Miller, "The elusive green background: Raymond Unwin and the greater London regional plan," *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 4, issue 1 (1989), pp. 15-44: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665438908725671>

Additional resources:

<https://environmentaldefence.ca/report/ontarios-greenbelt-under-threat-a-study-on-whats-at-risk/>

<https://resi.co.uk/advice/planning-permission/permitted-development-rights-green-belt>

www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/what-you-need-to-know-ontario-s-plan-to-8870554/

www.queensu.ca/pwip/projects/indigenous-planning-and-ontario-greenbelt-plan

www.greenbelt.ca/mncfn_06_18-2

<https://globalnews.ca/news/4880526/ontario-bill-66-greenbelt-development/>

Maps and images:

Map of the Golden Horseshoe: www.railwayage.com/regulatory/ontario-building-greater-golden-horseshoe-transportation-plan/

Map of the Greenbelt: <https://files.ontario.ca/on-2019/mmah-greenbeltmaps-en-1-schedule-1-greenbelt-area.pdf>

All other photographs and images are in the public domain.

To learn more about how the Greenbelt protects Ontario's environmental and cultural heritage, visit:

www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-greenbelt

www.greenbelt.ca/learn



Possibility grows here.

Pour obtenir une copie de ce guide en français, veuillez visiter www.greenbeltguide.ca ou appeler 416-585-7041.

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