

A View of

## **The Greater Toronto Area**

With respect to

## **A 'Countryside' Plan for Our Future**

Presented to

The Greater Toronto Services Board

On behalf of

STORM Coalition  
(Save The Oak Ridges Moraine)

1 May 1999

A position paper  
designed as an aid for  
informed planning.

## **The Greater Toronto Area**

### **A Countryside Plan for Our Future**

#### ***Preamble***

Examine the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) from a 'whole-region' perspective and discover both its unique and diverse attributes - natural and human-made. Attributes, that if protected and made accessible to residents and visitors, to rural and urban dwellers alike, could make the GTA a leading lifestyle environment model that combines employment opportunities, healthy communities in which to live and offers a host of leisure activities for its residents.

The overall success of the GTA for generations to come will depend on our ability - today - to consider environmental, societal and economic values together, on an equal footing, when we are faced with sustaining and improving the quality and standard of living for all residents in the region.

Four million people live within the GTA bounds, centred on Canada's largest city. Its rivers and streams empty into two of the Great Lakes, as well as Lakes Simcoe, Scugog and Rice Lakes. It supports a robust economy rooted in all aspects of human endeavour from agriculture to aerospace.

Accessible on day trips from anywhere within the GTA is a United Nations Biosphere Reserve or a cold headwaters stream perfect for fly fishing. One can attend an agricultural fall fair in the morning and enjoy the arts, theatre and music in the evening. Eat locally-grown corn on the cob for lunch and authentic Vietnamese cuisine for dinner.

It is this interplay between 'the city' and 'the country' that makes the GTA one of the most diverse and vibrant places in the world. The city is cosmopolitan, the country a mosaic. The GTA is more than just the sum of its different facets. It is this larger whole that offers us the potential for 'getting it right' as we plan for our future.

All of us who live, work and play within the GTA can and should be able to reap the benefits of a 'slow coming of age.' We have the advantage in that the GTA canvas is still relatively unpainted. We still have time to learn from the experience of other regions in the world as we begin our long range strategic planning.

In outlining this paper, we began the exercise by imagining what would be lost if urban sprawl within the GTA were to continue unchecked. We began to imagine the fragmentation of the human

spirit if there were no longer wild, natural areas within a day's trip of any point within the GTA. We tried to imagine how long it would take everyone to drive to reach some kind of quiet sanctuary outside the GTA. After several moments of this, we chose instead to look at the flip side of the equation; to examine the attributes that contribute so much to our quality of life and diversity of this region - it's strong agricultural base, the rich water resources on the surface and below the ground, the very air that we breathe, the luxury of access to any service imaginable in almost any language, employment opportunities and a most enjoyable place to live. From there, it was a natural next step to think about the values that each attribute brings to the region as a whole.

This paper is an examination of some of the attributes and their values that contribute so much to the diversity of the Greater Toronto Area:

- a strong agricultural base,
- rich water resources,
- the very air that we breathe,
- the variety of people and services,
- unlimited employment opportunities, and
- quality of life.

### ***Agriculture***

As of 1991, half of the GTA's land base was still classified agricultural. Agriculture and related industries were the second largest industrial sector in Ontario.

Agriculture is beneficial to the GTA. It produces food and contributes to the regional green-land system. It stimulates commercial and industrial economies. Farming today provides a link to the Ontario of our past while opening doors to different agrarian cultures which meet and compete in the variety of markets within the GTA. Specialized farming, community supported farming, family farms and organic farming support not only bring diversity but new and continuing life to the countryside.

### ***Water***

The water we see in ponds, wetlands, rivers and lakes is merely the surface manifestation of a huge and complex system that exists beneath our feet.

The obvious benefits of clean, cold and renewable water to the GTA include;

- drinking water for almost half a million people,
- irrigation for agriculture, golf courses, ski hills,
- habitat for flora and fauna, and
- tourism and recreation.

A 1996 report<sup>1</sup>, using the Town of Caledon as a case study, estimated the value of its ground water at between 10 and 33 million dollars.

Benefits generally not considered can include such intangible values as: the addition of millions of cubic meters of clean cold water to the Great Lakes ecosystem, a contribution to the water cycle and hence the micro climate of the GTA (via evapotranspiration).

Rivers are more than just pipelines delivering fresh water from their source in the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine to lakes to the south and north: They are unique ecosystems where water and land have a special relationship to each other. The river systems are dynamic *corridors of green* providing habitat, trails and landscape relief. They are a critical element in connecting us to the natural world.

### **Clean Air**

The Kyoto Protocol, a world-wide agreement to cut greenhouse gases, was negotiated in December 1997. Its primary concern is that of climate change, a global phenomenon that is projected to increase temperatures anywhere from 1° to 3.5° C. The likely effects of climate change to the GTA range from changes in lake levels and water quality, reduced wetlands, loss of fish habitat and deforestation.<sup>2</sup>

Other air issues such as smog and acid rain pose serious human and environmental health risks. The facts show that the transportation sector is the largest contributor to the production of CO<sub>2</sub> gases, sulphur dioxides, nitrogen oxides, ground-level ozone and particulate matter<sup>2</sup>.

What is also known is the efficacy of large stands of trees acting as carbon sinks to absorb CO<sub>2</sub> thus helping to ameliorate global warming and contributing to a more stable local and regional climate. The forests on the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment could be 'tools' useful in helping to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> levels.

Consequently the GTA has the potential to commit itself more and more to *sustainable development* as it pursues economic growth. It can do this through the protection and restoration of its woodlands

---

<sup>1</sup> *An Assessment of the Ecological and Economic Value of Ground water: Town of Caledon Case Study* by Marg Troyak, October 1996.

Prepared for Environment Canada - Ontario Region Economic Section, Great Lakes Environment Office, Great Lakes and Corporate Affairs, Canada Centre for Inland Waters in partnership with Metro Toronto Remedial Action Plan and The Humber Watershed Task Force.

<sup>2</sup> *Advancing Sustainability in the Great Lakes Basin*, Prepared by the York Centre for Applied Sustainability; David V.J. Bell, Anna Tilman, Annie Cheung, February 1, 1999  
Prepared for Environment Canada

and so helping Canada meet some of its CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction targets set out in the Kyoto Protocol.

### ***Specialized Services***

It is logical that specialized services be available in centres of greatest density of population.

In Toronto, specialized hospitals like the Hospital for Sick Children, Princess Margaret and Sunnybrook serve a wide rural area via helicopter.

The government of the province is located within the GTA.

Railway centres are located in and near the city of Toronto. Toronto is also a port on the St. Lawrence Seaway.

A greater selection of educational institutes, three major universities (one of which, University of Toronto is the third largest in North America), and five community colleges are within the urban area.

Several local airports and an international airport are located within the urban areas.

Industrial and commercial head offices are tending to move to the outer fringes and into rural countryside.

### ***Cultural Diversity***

The GTA is one of the most culturally diverse areas in the world.

Successive waves of European immigration contributed to the early development of Toronto and to the homesteading in rural areas. Immigration from Europe, Asia and the West Indies continues to the present day.

The GTA receives 42% of all immigrants to Canada with over 100 languages spoken. Many distinct and thriving 'pocket' communities are defined by ethnic rather than political boundaries.

Aboriginal communities are being re-established, and need support and recognition to be further strengthened.

### ***Employment***

The GTA is Canada's number one job creator - nearly 25% of Canada's new positions over the past five year's occurred within the GTA.

Perhaps we are in the process of bridging to an alternate social economic model. In conjunction with the influx of people who bring new skills, knowledge, interests and needs to the GTA, there is tremendous new growth in the number of people who are either working at home, self-employed or working part-time in a modified 'job-sharing' relationship.

## **Recreation**

The Niagara Escarpment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, and the region's river and stream valleys - these are the defining land form features of the GTA. They provide informal opportunities to enjoy the natural world and to get away from the stressful pace of life in which we all find ourselves.

These major features, as well as the waters and waterfronts of Lakes Ontario, Simcoe and Scugog as well as open spaces such as farmlands and woodlands, provide a natural legacy to GTA residents and visitors.

Recreation and tourism have considerable economic impact and trends show that people are looking increasingly for nature-based activities and informal recreation rather than facility-based activity: trails and wilderness parks rather than stadiums; living heritage communities as well as museums; bird-watching, hiking/walking, camping, canoeing, horseback riding and cycling; participant as well as spectator sport.

The opportunity to capitalize on these trends is present in the GTA's countryside.

## The Socio-Economic Realities of the 21st Century

Up to this point, we have painted a generally rosy picture of the GTA and its prospects.

But all this could be compromised by the disease of urban sprawl. If we go on just as we are, we and our children and grandchildren will live in a GTA increasingly characterized by longer and more expensive commuter times, more polluted air and water, and ever-decreasing access to open space and natural heritage areas, lack of affordable housing and public transit.

What are the economics of this? Too many people seem to think of sound environmental protection as a sort of add-on luxury - something it is nice to have, but most of which, alas, we cannot afford.

Fact is, we can't afford not to include the environment in our economic thinking. We can't ignore the costs of not looking after the environment and society - the costs of such things as depleted fish stocks, growing traffic congestion and commuter times, and increased air and water pollution with all the deleterious effects on health.

Why are we not more adept at putting dollar numbers on these costs and taking them into account? Why do we not include and quantify the benefits of good environment when we evaluate our economy?

For one thing, how do you calculate the equivalent value of a wetland left in its natural state to purify the headwaters of a river? Or the cost of replacing a natural wetland with stormwater retention ponds? Tough questions, but that is no excuse for not trying!

Second, much of the cost resulting from the harm we do to the environment is long-term and cumulative, and thus these costs are ignored or not even considered. In general, the people that incur the cost are not the people who, in the future, will bear the cost. Polluting a river upstream imposes unwanted costs on people downstream; unrestricted suburban development on the fringe increases unwanted traffic congestion closer to the city centre; groundwater contamination will possibly only be detected by future generations.

Economists have long recognized that the market cannot do the whole job here, that there is a role for government to correct for the imbalances that can cause urban sprawl.

For those who live in the Greater Toronto Area, a simple test may be proposed. Go out to one of the more rapidly developing sectors of suburban sprawl and ask yourself, "Can this go on indefinitely - just like this? If one day it extended, in massed, homogeneous formation, all the way up to Lake Simcoe, would that be all right?"

If not, why not, and what should we be doing about it?

## **Conclusions**

Being mindful of pockets of natural heritage within the urban landscape of Toronto and environs such as the Rouge Park, the valley trails of the Humber and Don Rivers, the Toronto Islands, Grenadier Pond in High Park and the Leslie Street Spit, we would redefine 'countryside' to include all the lands within the entire GTA. To better describe and articulate the value of this countryside, we propose the name Greater Toronto Countryside (GTC).

The different attributes described coalesce and form the whole.

The diverse agricultural communities can be allowed to survive. Our approved Official Plans do not have to be continually eroded by amendments.

The quality and base flow of our rivers can be maintained from their sources as they flow to lakes in the south and north. Our critical supply of ground water can be protected both from pollutants and by judicious control of usage.

Air quality in downtown Toronto and Mississauga can be ameliorated if forest cover on the Oak Ridges Moraine, Niagara Escarpment and river valleys is sustained and, where once lost, is restored.

We must hold firmly to our vision for this richly diverse, economically sound and uniquely wonderful segment of Ontario.

From a governance perspective, the Greater Toronto Countryside will continue to thrive as a function of its internal tensions. However, it will only survive if a common vision for the whole GTC becomes the overriding concept that influences the planning strategies of its member governments.

A non-governing forum such as the Greater Toronto Services Board can serve this function of articulating a GTC vision thus providing the context for long term planning by constituent governments.

The most important step to achieving sustainable development in the GTC is to first see the GTC as greater than a sum of its parts. Suddenly, rural lands are seen not as 'land waiting to be developed' but as land that can have other potentials and uses. Suddenly clean and renewable water, clean air, arable land and human health are real attributes with real value. And suddenly the vision of an economically viable, environmentally sustainable and socially acceptable GTC is attainable.

Let the Greater Toronto Countryside be a model for the future. Now.

An important component of this challenge is to envision a transportation and transit system that will integrate and connect GTA neighbourhoods. A system that renders the automobile optional, perhaps in places, even obsolete.

In keeping with the mandate of the Greater Toronto Services Board, the time is right to advance a more aggressive position on a public transit system.

Accessibility is therefore a major regional factor, dependent on an effective and affordable transportation network