

Greenbelt Coalition of Canada's Capital Region



NCC Falls Short in Advancing its Vision for the Greenbelt

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On May 24, 26 and June 1, the National Capital Commission will hold public consultations on three preliminary land use concepts it has developed for the National Capital Greenbelt.

While there are praiseworthy elements in these concepts, they fail to respond to the very green Vision adopted last November by the NCC's Board of Directors. "For the most part, the concepts merely tinker with the margins of the existing Greenbelt," said Sol Shuster, chair of the Greenbelt Coalition for Canada's Capital Region. "The suggested action is good for, at best, the next 5 to 10 years. Where is the 50-year vision?"

"When John Diefenbaker established the Greenbelt, it was based on a broad, visionary concept of the National Capital," said Donna DuBreuil, a Coalition member. "Similarly, what we need now is a comprehensive ecological vision of the connecting parts, as well as the whole. Given the enormous pressures exerted by the City for more roads, by developers for subdivisions and by other federal departments for new facilities, it is vital to identify all the areas that need protection, otherwise there will be nothing left to protect."

The Greenbelt Coalition is particularly concerned by the complete omission of an option to embrace the South March Highlands in at least one of the NCC's land use concepts, by the lack of detail in land that could be deleted from or added to the Greenbelt, and by the lack of substance underlying the proposed idea of ecological corridors.

"We expect the NCC to demonstrate strong leadership to ensure the long term health and expansion of the Greenbelt and all the natural areas that form the Capital Region's unique Emerald Necklace," Sol Shuster emphasized.

The Coalition urges members of the public to come out to the consultation sessions and raise their voices to demand better.

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For the Coalition's Position paper, please go to:
<http://www.greenbeltcoalition.ca/position-papers/>

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The NCC's Vision, Mission, Roles, Goals and Fundamental Premises document and some information about the Preliminary Land Use Concepts is accessible from:
http://canadascapital.gc.ca/bins/ncc_web_content_page.asp?cid=16300-20446-113585-113594-137274&lang=1&bhcp=1

Backgrounder

Greenbelt Coalition's Response to the NCC's Strategic Statements and Preliminary Land Use Concepts

Last November the National Capital Commission's Board of Directors approved a 50-year Vision for the Greenbelt:

“The Greenbelt will forever protect natural systems, agriculture and opportunities for outdoor recreation and education that will inspire Canadians and contribute to the sustainability and quality of life in Canada's Capital Region.”

The Greenbelt Coalition was very encouraged by the adoption of this Vision. Likewise, the Mission Statement, with its reference to “valued ecological and cultural resources” gave hope for forward looking plans to come. Still, we would have preferred to see mention at least at the Mission level of “Biodiversity” as a central organizing concept but at least it appears as the first goal under the Greenbelt's “Natural Environment” role.

This role is one of four recognized in the Strategic Statements about which the NCC is consulting the public this month, along with consultation on its Preliminary Land Use Concepts. The other proposed roles for the Greenbelt are Sustainable Agriculture, Capital Experiences & Recreation, and Built Facilities.

There is much to be commended in these Strategic Statements, including the recognition that the Natural Environment role is the “primary priority.” Besides protection and restoration of biodiversity, other goals under this heading frequently and appropriately make reference to land within and beyond the current Greenbelt boundaries.

Similarly, the first of eight Fundamental Premises (yet another section of the Strategic Statements) speak of the Greenbelt as a continuous belt that will “accommodate natural linkages to regional natural systems and expansion of the Greenbelt area.” The second premise posits that the Greenbelt will be “an environmental showcase” and demonstrate “leadership in environmental stewardship...”

How disappointing then to find that the next phase of analysis in this review exercise – a formulation of land use concepts – consists of options that display a serious disconnect from these Strategic Statements. Simply put, the three Land Use Concepts fail to respond to the Vision.

The first proposed Concept is to maintain the status quo. The other two Concepts are not much different in that they mostly tweak the edges of the existing Greenbelt. Furthermore, lands would not necessarily be added through acquisition -- it could also be through management of

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partnership agreements with private landowners. Some of the land that would be taken out of the Greenbelt is ill-defined, especially around the Ottawa Airport -- no distinction is made between transportation facilities and high-value environmental areas.

The current threats to the Greenbelt are too significant to leave to tentative and timid possibilities. The review's Existing Conditions report correctly identified the significant pressure on the Greenbelt from surrounding urban growth. This includes the City of Ottawa's desire, as expressed in its 2008 Transportation Master Plan, for more than a dozen new roads or widenings (often to six lanes) to service these suburban communities. These additional roadways would further fragment the Greenbelt.

We won't have to wait till 2060 to see these pressures cause the Greenbelt to wither and die. There is massive development underway in the Kanata area, where the Beaver Pond Forest was clear-cut this past winter. In the same area, the Terry Fox Road Extension has sliced through prime plant and wildlife habitats and more development proposals are in the works, greatly threatening one of this region's most important natural areas, the South March Highlands. Indeed, one of the NCC's own consultants referred to this area as "the highest level of native floristic diversity of *any* natural area in the City of Ottawa" (Brunton 2008).

Degradation of the South March Highlands will have a direct and very negative impact on the existing Greenbelt because two thirds of the water feeding Shirley's Bay originates there. Kill or degrade the South March Highlands and you're starving Shirley's Bay.

Moreover, these Highlands are not only the most densely biodiverse area in Ottawa, they also are testimony to an Aboriginal heritage that goes back 10,000 years, when this land emerged from the Champlain Sea. The Mission's promise of valuing cultural resources is nowhere reflected in the land use concepts. The NCC is missing an important opportunity to make an expanded Greenbelt a cultural showcase, with other partners in the national capital region.

This past year has seen a Trade Show facility built on environmentally sensitive Greenbelt lands at the Airport. South of the Airport, plans for business parks threaten the ecology of the Leirim Wetland – another of Ottawa's world-class jewels. The protection of this ecosystem calls for NCC leadership -- it must take a firm stand now for the protection of this area.

The Coalition's Position Paper, submitted to the NCC last September after more than a year of analysis and discussion among its 14 Members, set forth a number of recommendations, including the urgent need to expand the areas of protection if the Greenbelt lands themselves are to survive.

The current Greenbelt was not created in annual one-acre chunks over 50 years. It resulted from a vision for the Nation's Capital and that is what we need to see again today – a broad ecological vision of eco-connectivity to put meaning into the 50-year Vision for the Greenbelt. Our paper urges the NCC to see the Greenbelt as a vital part of the capital region's Emerald Necklace formed by linkages between Shirley's Bay, the South March Highlands, Stony Swamp, Marlborough Forest, Mer Bleue, the Ottawa River Islands, Leamy Lake and Gatineau Park.

Land Use Concepts must reflect the Vision of what the Greenbelt should be in 50 years and take the needed steps today towards achieving that goal.