SUMMARY *The southern Ontario Greenbelt, established in 2005, is deservedly celebrated. It reduces growth-related pressures on a significant swath of foodlands and ecological services, and complements other sprawl control measures in the expanding Greater Golden Horseshoe. Unfortunately, it promises only to mitigate the adverse effects of a rising population with ever higher demands on planetary capacities. What we really need is a transition to ways of planning and living that move us towards sustainability.*

RÉSUMÉ *Établie en 2005, la ceinture de verdure du sud de l'Ontario est célèbre à juste titre. Elle réduit la pression de la croissance sur une importante partie des terres agricoles et des services écologiques du territoire, en plus de compléter les autres mesures contre l'urbanisation de la région élargie du Golden Horseshoe. Malheureusement, elle promet seulement d'atténuer les effets négatifs d'une population grandissante dont les pressions sur les capacités de production de la planète ne cessent d'augmenter. Ce dont nous avons réellement besoin est de changer nos façons de planifier et de vivre afin de nous rapprocher de la viabilité à long terme*

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE GREENBELT

BY ROBERT B. GIBSON, BA, MA, PHD

Here is a question that is not often asked: Is brilliant planning initiative *X* [insert your favourite example here] helping us move closer to a desirable and resilient future, or is it just *slowing* our descent into ever deepening unsustainability?

The answer clearly matters. If current efforts are promising merely to slow the sinking of our ship, we need to do more, and maybe do it quite differently. The question should probably be asked more often in planning deliberations.

For the purposes of an initial illustration, we can consider the case of greenbelts. The best-known in Canada is the southern Ontario Greenbelt, established by the provincial government in 2005, as part of a larger initiative to manage urban growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. It enjoys impressive public support[1] and is widely celebrated[2] as a bold move to protect ecological services and foodlands on the periphery of a rapidly expanding urban megalopolis.

Certainly, the Greenbelt's design and implementation could be improved. From the outset it attracted criticism concerning the drawing of its boundaries, the absence of a dedicated implementation body and the potential for leapfrog development. It also introduced inequities for property owners who might otherwise have sold or converted their lands for suburban development. All these are matters that merit attention and may get some in the mandatory 10-year review scheduled for 2015.

But neither the celebrated aspects nor the usually identified concerns address the bigger question—whether the Greenbelt is helping us move closer to a desirable and resilient future, or just slowing our decline.

AIMING HIGH OR LOW?

Like the best of greenbelts internationally, the southern Ontario contribution is meant to serve a range of remarkably positive objectives.[3] Especially notable is the combination of sustainable livelihood and stewardship goals: enhancing the economic viability of farming and farm communities and preserving valued ecological and socio-cultural qualities. At the same time, the greenbelt is a defensive structure, meant to resist, protect and preserve in the face of internal and external pressures.

Arguably the southern Ontario Greenbelt is mostly for defence. It was created as part of a larger set of growth management planning initiatives that aimed to reduce the high and rising costs of sprawling urban and suburban growth and its indirect consequences.[4] But so far, these laudable responses to sprawl costs have not led to a serious public conversation about overall limits. No one is promising a reduction in overall demands on biophysical capacity. Nor do we hear much about how the planning initiatives will affect trends in intra- and inter-generational equity, lasting livelihood opportunities, resource efficiencies, informed engagement and preparedness for surprise. And, except for greenhouse gas emissions and climate change adaptation studies, there is little recognition of the broader global context, which is also affected by our demands.

Instead (with a few salutary exceptions) we accept, even embrace, growth in population, consumption, and overall footprint, as an inevitability to be accommodated. In southern Ontario, the *Places to*

Grow initiative anticipates accommodating another 3.7 million people by 2031,[4] all of them likely to adopt a consumption profile much like that of their neighbours. And no one is suggesting that the flow of new residents and rising consumptive demands will end in 2031.

Evidently, we do not foresee limits. Instead we mitigate some of the negative effects and, against all available evidence, we hope that it will be enough. That would seem to qualify as aiming low.

AIMING HIGH ON THIS PLANET

If we were to go beyond mitigation and treat greenbelts and related regional planning issues seriously as potential contributions to sustainability, a suitable first step would be to consider the global context. Most immediately, that involves recognizing our vulnerability to unsettled global prospects for cheap oil, financial stability, food security, and climate predictability—a set of concerns that suggest we should be enhancing our capacities for self-reliance and rapid adaptation, as well as contributing to global solutions.

The second step is to see that these global vulnerabilities are symptomatic of three underlying factors:

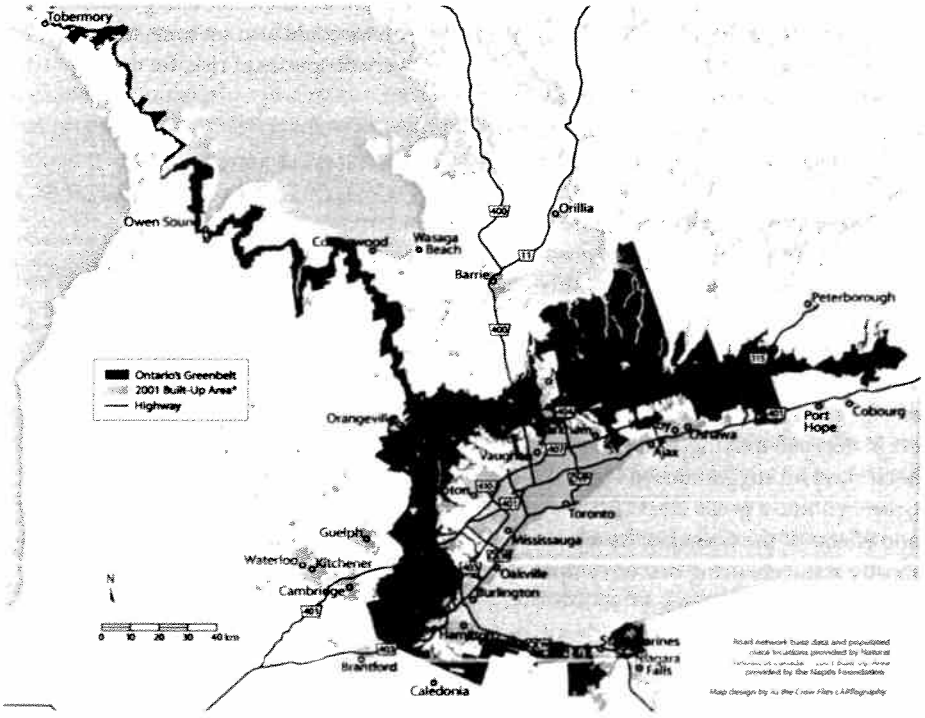
- Every year overall human demands on biospheric capacity (sources, sinks and services) to grow further beyond the level that might be sustainable over time, given current technological and managerial capacities. The World Wildlife Fund calculates that we crossed the threshold of demanding too much in about 1978; our demands are now about 50% beyond that threshold and still rising.[5]
- Huge numbers of people do not have the means to meet their basic material needs. About 925 million people were malnourished in 2008, up from about 850 million in 1990,[6,7] and the 2.7 billion people who live on less than $2/day are at best vulnerable to the risks of disease and disaster that come with poverty.[8]
- The main beneficiaries of growth are those who are already well off. The richest 10% of the world's population receive about 67% of the world's income while the poorest 10% get about 0.22%.[9]

These trends and effects are the big indicators—resulting from deeply entrenched structures and practices, intricately intertwined, mutually reinforcing and not possibly sustainable. The temptation to ignore them is great, especially when over the past few decades there have also been significant improvements in well-being for many people, and even for some environmental parameters, in many places. But as with the more specific problem of looming climate change, delay in responding to the big indicators just gives us less time to make the necessary transition.

Globally, and by unavoidable consequence, locally, we are now firmly into a world of limits, where the fundamental assumptions underlying our dominant approaches to progress are no longer potentially viable. In a world where we have apparently already overshot the sustainable carrying capacity, we can no longer rely on economic growth, based on additional as well as more efficient exploitation of energy and material resources, to improve well-being. Nor can we reasonably expect the trickling-down of expanding material wealth to deal with poverty, or rely on impact mitigation to protect valued ecological and socio-cultural qualities. While all of these may still have some value, none can be sufficient.

We need, and are now beginning to develop and apply, a more suitable and hopeful set of alternative approaches to generally improved well-being. The core components require us to:

- recognize the ultimately limited capacities of our planetary resources and biophysical systems and cut back on our overall demands, probably mostly through much more sensitive and efficient resource extraction, distribution and use;
- decouple economic development from expansion of energy and material demand;
- focus our material capacities on



providing enough for all (in part by favouring lower energy and material demand options for improving the well-being of people who are already comfortable); and

> respect complexity, expect surprise and build adaptive capacity as we work on the transition.

AIMING HIGH IN CANADA

The practical implications for planning can be illustrated by a rough calculation, focused on only one of the requirements for moving towards sustainability. That is the requirement to cut back on our demands on the planet's sources, sinks and services in light of the fundamental factors noted above. The calculation begins with global needs to reduce our demands on the biosphere to get back to a potentially sustainable level, plus enough to provide at least the essentials for the billion or so people who do not have that now. There must also be a cushion to allow for global population growth and for error and surprise. Together, those considerations probably entail an average 50% cut globally. But in a world of profoundly unequal consumption and wealth, most of the actual cuts must be the responsibility of the culpable and capable. Our fair share in one of the richest countries in the world is probably in the 70-90% range.[10]

That is a very long stride from aiming to soften the negative effects of adding, for example, 3.7 million more southern Ontario style consumers to the Greater Golden Horseshoe area. Here, and in most of the rest of Canada, moving towards a desirable and resilient future is not a matter of mitigation, but of transition.

In the southern Ontario Greenbelt and associated growth management initiatives, there have already been admirable efforts to shift the basic model of urban planning, to strengthen regional food systems, and to engage more citizens and other stakeholders in decision-making. There have even been cheerful suggestions to expand the Greenbelt into a green cloak. But the design and effects of the Greenbelt have been mostly about ensuring that our ship sinks more slowly.

So far, we have not tried to identify the current or prospective limits to our local and regional carrying capacity, or our burdens on the carrying capacities of other places from which we draw energy and material goods. We have not seriously considered what contributions we should make to lowering overall human demands on the biosphere, or what we need to do to reduce our local vulnerabilities and stay within our carrying capacities here.

Probably we should do all of those things.

There can be no blueprint for the future in a world so complex and unpredictable. Nor can there be firm calculations of carrying capacity, since future technological innovations can shift the possibilities. But we can often identify limiting factors, approximate the location of key thresholds, and sketch out the requirements for reversing undesirable trends. We should be able to sketch out what we need to do to move our regions significantly closer to sustainability over the next 25 or 50 years, and how to do it in ways that also encourage desirable shifts in human behaviour in the rest of the world.

Surely we could set some broad objectives for reducing our consumption of non-renewable fuels, for expanding reliance on local foodlands, and for shrinking the overall area covered by impermeable surfaces (roofs, roads, etc.). We could set deadlines for eliminating homelessness, for tripling the public transit share of intra- and inter-urban transportation, and for full conversion to renewable energy sources. Maybe we could also set some targets for recovery of species at risk, for cutting income inequality, and for increasing employment in sustainability-enhancing sectors and organizations.

Even without an overall vision and specific goals, we can shift our perspective from mitigation to positive contribution. We can begin to treat greenbelts and associated urban areas as places where every one of our decisions aims to reverse the prevailing trends towards deeper unsustainability. We can ensure that every one of our new or renewed projects, programs, plans and policies is designed to make a positive contribution to a desirable and durable future, locally and globally.

We don't do that very often now. But we could.

Eventually we must. The best strategy would be to start now and embrace it as an enormously hopeful opportunity to test and demonstrate approaches to the recovery and well-being that are needed everywhere. ■

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