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Greenbelt Foundation Backgrounder

Report Launch: Improving Access to Large Parks in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe: Policy, Planning, and Funding Strategies

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Overview

The Greenbelt Foundation and Green Infrastructure Ontario have published a new research report titled [*Improving Access to Large Parks in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe: Policy, Planning, and Funding Strategies*](#). This report is a follow-up to research published in 2019, the [*State of Large Parks in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe*](#). The report presents an analysis of current and planned large park distribution and accessibility within the Golden Horseshoe (GH) region, and proposes strategies to overcome barriers to the equitable funding, planning, and establishment of new large parks in the region.

Background

The purpose of the *Improving Access to Large Parks in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe: Policy, Planning, and Funding Strategies* report is to update the 2019 version with additional park inventories. The report also looks to assess which areas in the Golden Horseshoe have low accessibility to large parks, identify key barriers and challenges to large park planning in the region, and identify practices and models for large park planning across the country and globally. A "large park" is defined in the report as a park over 20 hectares in area.

A number of different benefits to human health, climate change, and biodiversity are associated with large parks. All parks contribute ecosystem services such as improved air quality, extreme heat mitigation, and flood minimization, and these benefits are magnified in parks over 20 hectares, like those studied for this report. Access to large parks is also beneficial to the mental and physical health of the people who utilize the greenspace. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for accessible parks and greenspaces has risen as more Canadians realized the importance of nature.

Large parks can advance Indigenous reconciliation efforts by recognizing and upholding Indigenous rights, such as treaty rights and the right to self-determination. Various jurisdictions across the Golden Horseshoe region are working to include and prioritize Indigenous voices and perspectives in planning and land-use discussions. The report discusses different strategies municipalities and conservation authorities are taking to increase Indigenous access to public lands, and how to better manage greenspaces in partnership with Indigenous communities.

Key Findings

The report also highlights a number of other key findings about large park access across the region:

- The population growth projected in Ontario’s Growth Plan means that there will be fewer large parks per capita in the Greater Golden Horseshoe region over the next 10 to 20 years. Existing parks are also expected to face more pressures.
- At least 2.1 million people in the region are currently living in a neighbourhood with low accessibility to a large park.
- Approximately 1.7 million people, or 1 in 5 in the study area, have no large parks within a 15-minute walk of their residence. Another 800,000 have no access to a large park within a 30-minute walk. Access by bicycle or public transit is not consistent and unevenly distributed across the region.

Key Recommendations

Several recommendations to overcome barriers to the equitable funding, planning, and establishment of new large parks in the Golden Horseshoe are discussed in the report. The research identifies a need for a regional strategy for large park planning and intergovernmental coordination. The report recommends the establishment of innovative funding and legislative approaches and partnerships to increase the size and quality of large parks.

Possible approaches are detailed, including:

- The reconfiguration of parkland dedication bylaws under Section 42 of the *Planning Act* to generate revenue through cash-in-lieu payments.
- Incorporating green infrastructure assets into asset management plans.
- Updating existing provincial and federal infrastructure funding programs.
- Addressing issues of liability for different landholders to increase the viability of including land trusts and non-conventional greenspaces in the parks network.

The report recommends that funders and decision-makers should be considering ways to fund and deliver programming to reduce barriers and improve equitable access to existing parks. The report also cites examples of local programs and transferable models to develop best practices to increase equitable access across the region.

About Greenbelt Foundation:

Greenbelt Foundation is a charitable organization, solely dedicated to ensuring the Greenbelt remains permanent, protected and prosperous. We make the right investments in its interconnected natural, agricultural, and economic systems, to ensure a working, thriving Greenbelt for all. Ontario's Greenbelt is the world's largest, with over two million acres of farmland, forests, wetlands and rivers working together to provide clean air, fresh water, and a reliable local food source.

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