

Replacing Greenbelts with Green Dots and Rural Enthusiasts

by Ralph C. Martin

My first overnight stay in Toronto, due to showing my 4-H steer at the Royal Winter Fair, was a nightmare of noise and light pollution. The woman who billeted us was as accommodating as she could be but I couldn't wait to retreat to the farm to get decent meals and a good night's sleep. I had no idea I was rural enthusiast until then.

As farmland protection becomes more crucial (see evidence at <http://ontariofarmlandtrust.ca/>) it might be time to offer the benefits of rural living to more people. Let me try to resolve this apparent contradiction.

Dependable agricultural land consists of classes 1, 2 and 3 land. Class 1 land has no significant limitations for crop use, class 2 land has moderate limitations and class 3 land has moderately severe limitations. Non-dependable agricultural land ranges from class 4, with severe limitations, to class 7, with no capacity for arable culture or permanent pasture i.e. think rocks.

In 1971, about 6,900 square kilometres of dependable agricultural land was urbanized in Canada, and thirty years later, by 2001, the urbanization of dependable agricultural land had more than doubled to 14,300 square kilometres. This begs the question of what we as Canadian citizens want it to be by 2031.

Astute gamblers will understand that the odds of securing stable crop yields on dependable agricultural land are much higher than on poorer land of classes 4 – 7. As climate change brings seasons with too much or too little water, or temperatures that are too high or too low, at the wrong times, it will become increasingly important to retain our best land to produce food.

The Greenbelt zone around Toronto, where development has been frozen, is shifting development pressure to regions such as Brantford, just outside the Greenbelt.

What if there was a Green Dot rather than a Greenbelt policy? Green Dots could be development-free zones, applicable to all dependable agricultural land and ecologically important landscapes, such as wetlands, across Ontario, or better yet, across Canada.

Land classes 1, 2 and 3 are of high value for farming today and will have even more crop production value, in the future. The Green Dot policy will be an investment in resilience and food security. Rather than covering dependable agricultural land with pavement and cement near city boundaries, people and businesses could set up in rural areas on non-dependable agricultural land between the Green Dots.

For the sake of my readers, and in consideration of the reputation of land use planners, let me clarify that I am not a land use planner. However, I recognize there are laws and policies for land use which attempt to accommodate traditions and expectations as varied as the citizens who live, work and play on rural land.

It is challenging for farmers to manage boundaries with non-farmers who don't appreciate the aroma of freshly spread manure and other farming activities. Contiguous areas of farmland minimize farmer-consumer interaction, whereas Green Dots might ramp up this interaction. Several of my aggie students see this as an opportunity.

Some folks prefer public transportation and may feel isolated in a home far from urban conveniences. On the other hand is it really so impossible to develop an effective public transportation system throughout rural southern Ontario, especially if there are more people? Perhaps rural citizens would like enough services in their local communities to avoid trips all the way to bright lights, except for special occasions.

Start-ups are thriving in rural England, according to Andrew Johnson in the Guardian Weekly, January 2, 2015. "There's a myth out there that innovation happens in cities and major towns. In fact we're seeing lots of innovation, lots of exports and new technology start-ups, in rural areas."

It has always irked me that the creative class, popularized by Richard Florida, is usually associated with cities. For centuries the creative class in rural areas has forged a dynamic living from the land. Why not welcome more city cousins of the countrified creative class to live between Green Dots?

Andrew Johnson noted growth is trending toward being higher in the English countryside than in cities as superfast broadband becomes more available. The quality of life in rural areas

has inherent benefits. Being connected to others on this globe may be more about advanced communication than transportation.

On my first trip to Muskoka, as a youth, I met a kind and jovial man who moved within the landscape as if he belonged. After one of a sap bucket full of stories, illustrating perseverance, I asked if he had ever wanted to live in a city where life might be more comfortable. He smiled and said “I’m thankful other people want to live in big cities and then I don’t have to.” Perhaps a Green Dot policy will facilitate a new generation of rural enthusiasts, while also preserving farmland.

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