

SELECTIVE MATHEMATICS

ONTARIO PROPERTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ALLIANCE

Unit A – 135 Church Street, North, Mount Forest, Ontario, N0G 2L2

Phone: (519) 323-2308 / Fax: (519) 323-0289

E-Mail: opera@bmts.com / Web Page: www.bmts.com/~opera/

VALIDATING THE GREENBELT - AGAIN

A Report entitled “Evaluating the Economic Benefits of Greenbelt Assets” was recently commissioned by The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation and produced by Econometric Research Limited under the direction of its President and founder, Dr. Atif Kurbursi. The Report is a sweeping, multi-colored, 110 page presentation of compelling rhetoric and 3-dimensional charts. Its cost, distribution and later funding potential are not mentioned.

The credentials of Dr. Kurbursi, a respected scholar and former senior appointee to several government ministries, are impressive and comprehensive and the professional competence of Econometric Research Limited as a paid consultant is assumed to be no less so. Still, the conclusions reached in this evaluation appear to heavily rely on some statistics and circumstances that pre-date the Greenbelt Act. Further, while suggesting various activities and enterprises within the 1.8 million-acre Greenbelt area might together contribute \$9.1 billion to the Ontario economy each year, it offers no assurance such benefit is anything more than an optimistic estimate. Whether that estimate has been, or ever will be, confirmed by independent peer review is an open question.

Meanwhile, much to the credit of its author, the Report includes an “Appendix B: Limitations” section from which several verbatim quotations are instructive. Examples; “It should be stressed that the results of an economic impact analysis are estimates based on an accounting framework that represents average parameter values of the Ontario economy in 2006” and “in evaluating these estimates there should be some allowance for a margin of error to the extent that actual observations deviate from actual values”. For ordinary citizens whose taxes are supporting Friends of the Greenbelt and all their works, these prudent reservations encourage cautious reflection on the extent and timing of pre-calculated economic windfalls. Are we to assume Ontario’s massive provincial debt, now at \$16 billion and counting, would balloon to \$25 billion without Greenbelt’s magic multiplier?

Not surprisingly, Friends of the Greenbelt and the various interest groups they choose to support will be ecstatic about Dr. Kurbursi’s assessment and its statistical projection of a \$9 billion leveraged contribution to the provincial economy. That glowing prospect and equally inspired testimonials already circulated or yet to germinate will no doubt surface to loud acclaim at the ten year Greenbelt Review scheduled for 2015. Meanwhile, not many working and middle class folks whose shrinking resources are helping support the ambitions and manipulations of Ontario’s environmental brotherhood will ever see, much less understand and endorse, this or similar exercises in Greenbelt marketing. Nor is the current Greenbelt administration likely to acknowledge, much less publish, any material that challenges its environmental convictions or entrenched political connections.

In that context, the Greenbelt’s “other” side is reflected in a professional 2009 analysis in which private property devaluation of up to 60% is traced to Greenbelt legislation. A later critique of Greenbelt economic prospects from a University of Guelph committee tends to support that finding. Nor are media accounts uncommon that report some “greenbelted” farmers are migrating to jurisdictions less hostile to their occupation, product range and life style. Finally, a Fraser Institute recent study entitled “Stealth Confiscation: How Governments Regulate, Freeze and Devalue Private Property – Without Compensation” includes Ontario’s Greenbelt as an example of government-sanctioned extortion by statute. That revealing document provides another dimension for Dr. Kurbursi’s economic insights and .accompanies the covering e-mail to which these comments are also attached.

Based on published Internet data, Friends of the Greenbelt management was entrusted with a \$25 million gift from the Ontario government in 2005 and a further injection of \$20 million in 2011 to lubricate Greenbelt promotion and programs. To that end, it rightly claims to have disbursed, over the past 6 years, a great deal of taxpayer money to various supporter-participants in the Greenbelt universe. Most of these are dedicated private sector environmental or farm-oriented groups while some are municipal or provincial government organizations.

Led by Environmental Defence, a professional lobbyist extensively researched in the 1996 best seller “Trashing the Economy” and believed to have first infiltrated Canada’s environmental industry in 2004, a number of these groups originally helped initiate the Greenbelt concept. The current President and CEO of Friends of the Greenbelt is the former CEO of Environmental Defence in Ontario, an organization that apparently received \$1,650,000.00 of Greenbelt promotional funding since 2006. Another avid Greenbelt promoter, the David Suzuki Foundation, won a \$120,000.00 Greenbelt grant in 2009 to produce a study, “Promoting Greenbelt Economic Values” which presumably doesn’t duplicate Dr. Kurbursi’s recent evaluation. By 2011 additional grants totaling \$543,000.00 were shared among still other select Greenbelt pioneers, EcoJustice (Sierra Legal Defense Fund), Ontario Nature and the Sierra Club. Between 2005 and 2011 total executive and management salaries for Friends of the Greenbelt evidently accounted for \$3,411,575.00.

Clearly a significant percentage of Ontario’s fiscal resources are being expended in Greenbelt administration and promotion. But the whole lobbyist-inspired, publicly-funded Greenbelt endeavor, however commendable and widely supported in principle, is analogous to Ontario’s “green” energy experiment. Both initiatives, in the cold light of recession and widespread unemployment, are fiscally unsustainable without huge government subsidies financed on the backs of the unwashed masses left shivering in the dark without an environmental grant in sight.

Meanwhile, tension between existing economic reality and alleged environmental urgency is sharpened when special interest groups registered as tax exempt charities invoke political means to achieve ecological ends. There is in Canada a growing perception that environmental lobbyists should either surrender their charitable status or cease their political activities. This troubling paradox recently surfaced in British Columbia where special interest groups led by the incumbent CEO of Environmental Defence, the ubiquitous American-based lobbyist registered as a tax exempt charity in Canada, are vigorously contesting a pipeline installation tentatively approved by duly elected authorities to expand Canada’s oil exports and so strengthen Canada’s sputtering economy. It’s also seen in a metropolitan newspaper column asking “is Suzuki Foundation engaged in charitable work or politics?” and announcing Dr. Suzuki’s resignation from his “charitable” Foundation so that his political views and activities no longer threaten its tax exempt privilege.

Given unaddressed concerns with respect to Greenbelt creation and administration and notwithstanding Dr. Kurbursi’s exhaustive analysis of its leveraged place in Ontario’s economic sun, it’s hoped the over-taxed and increasingly cynical electorate of this province will expect their elected representatives to at least begin listing some penetrating questions for the 2015 Greenbelt Review.

R.A. (Bob) Fowler, OPERA Secretary