

This guide was developed as a final student assignment for the Planning for Agricultural Conservation course, co-delivered by the University of Guelph and the Ontario Farmland Trust. While it is informed by academic research and case studies, it does not represent the official views or recommendations of OFT.

A MUNICIPAL TOOLKIT

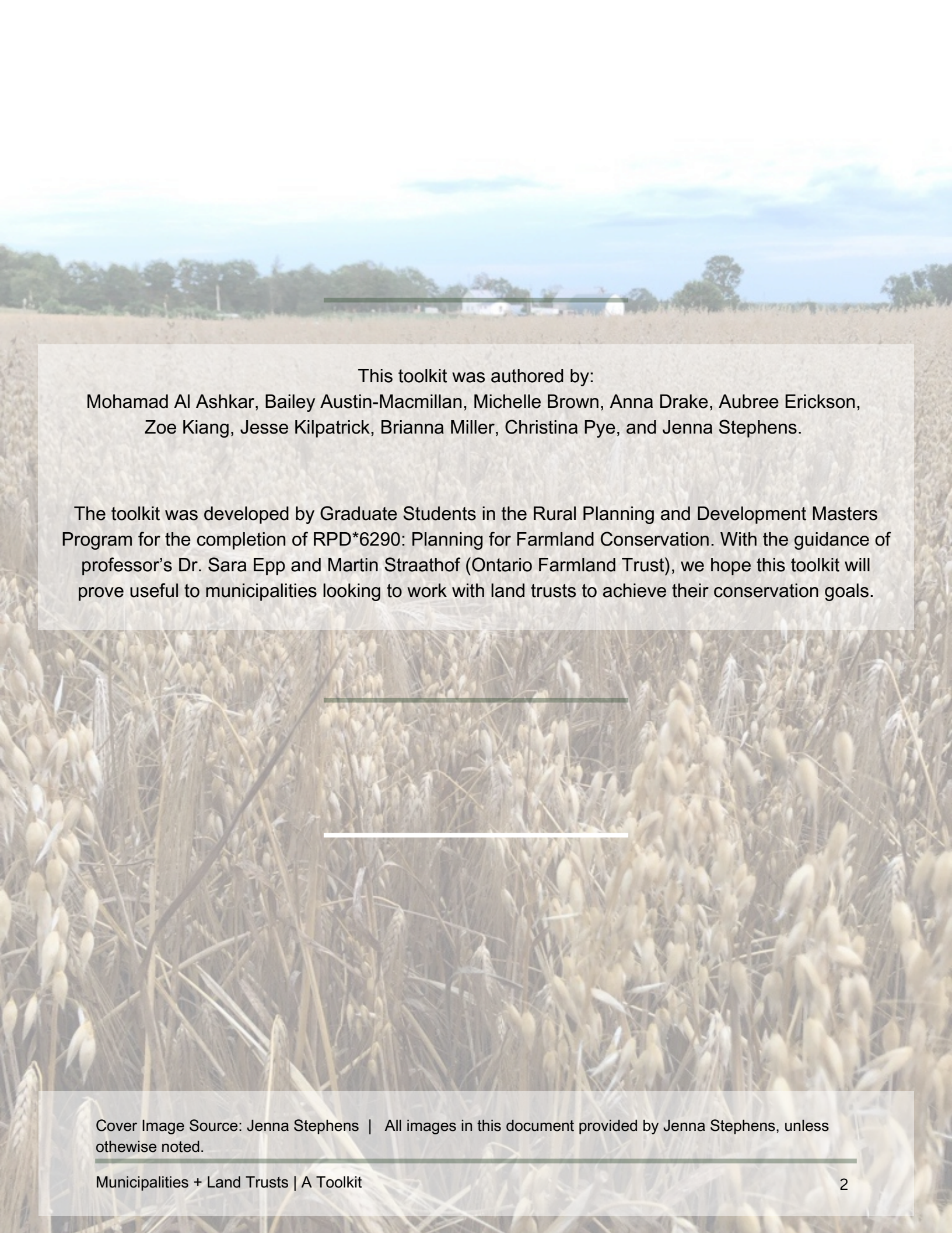
HOW MUNICIPALITIES CAN WORK WITH LAND TRUSTS

Developed in partnership with:



SCHOOL OF
ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT





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The toolkit was developed by Graduate Students in the Rural Planning and Development Masters Program for the completion of RPD*6290: Planning for Farmland Conservation. With the guidance of professor's Dr. Sara Epp and Martin Straathof (Ontario Farmland Trust), we hope this toolkit will prove useful to municipalities looking to work with land trusts to achieve their conservation goals.

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1. Executive Summary

Municipalities have a critical role in supporting Canada's goal of conserving 30% of land and water by 2030 (Government of Canada [GOC], 2024). Farmland loss is happening at a rate of 319 acres per day, which results not only in the loss of agricultural production, but also the depletion of vital ecosystems and other natural features ([Ontario Federation of Agriculture] OFA, 2022). To help mitigate this, municipalities can collaborate with land trusts to protect both agricultural lands and key natural features within their boundaries (Ontario Farmland Trust [OFT], 2023).

The 2024 Provincial Planning Statement (PPS) includes provisions for the protection of natural heritage features, water, and agriculture. However, the sections are vague, and they do not provide stringent guidelines on how these features are to be protected (PPS, 2024). Municipalities can use the general guidelines provided by the PPS and create stronger protections through their Official Plans and Zoning By-Laws. Where protections cannot be solely dictated by the municipality, land trusts such as the Ontario Farmland Trust can step in to provide more stringent and permanent protections through Conservation or farmland easements which stay on the title of parcel and are harder to undo (OFT, 2023).

Land trusts are non-profit organizations that acquire and manage land for conservation purposes, typically through donation or purchases. Another mechanism that is used to protect farmland are conservation or farmland easements. Conservation or farmland easements are legal agreements between landowners and land trusts. These agreements prevent residential, commercial, or industrial development while allowing the landowner to continue agricultural activities or other land management practices (OFT, n.d.). This flexible yet protective approach secures the land for conservation or agriculture, ensuring that that land is persevered and protected for future generations.

Partnerships between land trusts and municipalities have been able to protect large swaths of continuous land, as is the case with the ongoing Corridor Project in the Georgian Bay area. The Georgian Bay Land Trust (GBLT) and several municipalities are working together to protect over 36,000 acres – including 553 acres of municipally owned land (GBLT, 2024). Municipalities in Ontario can partner with land trusts to preserve farmland through various strategies besides easements, including:

1. **Zoning and Land Use Policies:** Municipalities can pass by-laws, supported by land trusts, to prioritize farmland conservation through zoning laws and land-use policies.
2. **Agricultural Land Acquisition:** Municipalities and land trusts can collaborate to purchase or acquire lands at risk of being sold for development.
3. **Public Education and Stewardship:** Raising awareness about the benefits of land stewardship and supporting farmers with agri-environmental programs can also play a critical role.
4. **Financial Incentives:** Landowners can be incentivized to enter into agreements with a land trust through tax reductions, the elimination of the capital gains tax, etc. Landowners can also donate ecologically significant lands under the Ecological Gifts Program (EGP) (Gov't of Canada, 2024).

Through these mechanisms, Ontario municipalities and land trusts can effectively protect farmland for future generations.

2. Understanding Land Trusts

Land trusts are non-profit, charitable organizations that acquire private land through purchasing or title donations and work collaboratively with landowners to establish conservation agreements including easements, covenants, and servitudes (Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, 2024a). Also known as farmland trusts, community land trusts, historical trusts or conservation trusts, land trusts provide stewardship and manage land in perpetuity. Land trusts can be found on every continent in the world, and Canada has 150 land trusts that exist both locally and regionally (Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, 2024b). Unlike conservation authorities and other government land protection agencies, land trusts are non-governmental, private organizations that are supported by the community through memberships, volunteers, and donations (Thousand Islands Watershed Land Trust, 2025). Land trusts are akin to large conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada and Ducks Unlimited Canada, in that they are non-partisan groups focused on advocacy, education, and collaborative conservation efforts, and they are also “direct action” organizations that engage in land stewardship through both direct and indirect land ownership (Thousand Islands Watershed Land Trust, 2025).

2.a. Conservation Mechanisms

Land trust organizations act as a key resource for municipalities in land conservation and stewardship. Municipalities can work with land trusts on funding, policy and strategy development, public education pursuits, and partnership on larger conservation projects. Mechanisms regularly used by land trust organizations for conservation include land acquisition through purchase or donation, life estate, right of first refusal, conservation covenants/easements, management agreements and leases (Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, 2024b). Whether land is under an easement agreement, or the land trust organization holds direct ownership, the organization will ensure the protection of the land, including supervising, monitoring, and compliance, forever (Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, 2024b).



3. Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a legally binding agreement made between a landowner and a conservation body to protect and maintain the specified lands ecological integrity, historical importance, or natural landscape (Conservation Land Act, 1990). The Conservation Land Act (1990) works to protect wetlands, lands for wildlife biodiversity, lands with important natural features, lands used for “the protection of water quantity and quality” including watersheds, and agricultural lands.

Conservation easements can provide significant benefits including: protecting natural landscapes and water ways/waterways, preserving wildlife habitats and ecosystems, conserving agricultural lands, and protecting historically significant areas. Landowners can keep their property while placing a conservation easement on it, resulting in perpetual protection, even if the land changes ownership (Dresher, Kosciński, Quinn, & Roblin, 2025). However, challenges could include the initial cost of establishing the agreement, agreement negotiation, and enforcement to ensure compliance with the agreement. Another challenge is that some landowners may feel that an easement on their property limits the activities that they can engage in on their land, or they worry about what their children may want to do with the land once it has been willed to them (Dresher, Kosciński, Quinn, & Roblin, 2025). Lastly, conservation easement agreements are difficult to amend or update, which could result in the measures initially negotiated into the agreement no longer being sufficient to protect the land in perpetuity due to changes including climate change (Dresher, Kosciński, Quinn, & Roblin, 2025).

There are three main steps to completing a conservation easement: preparation, creation, and stewarding (Greenaway, 2017). During the preparation phase, a policy framework should be structured to outline goals and visions of the agreement. This phase should also determine what protocols need to be followed by the easement holder and landowner, and any templates or materials that will be used throughout the process should also be assembled (Greenaway, 2017). The second step is creation of the conservation easement agreement. Easements are very specific to the lands that the agreement will be on and the specific conservation goals for that property. However, the mechanisms for creating these agreements include drafting a satisfactory agreement inclusive of the visions and goals for all parties, and then enacting the agreement (Greenaway, 2017). Finally, once the agreement has been finalized comes stewardship. Stewarding is the heart of all conservation agreements, this is the process of monitoring, enforcing, and reporting, ensuring that the conservation is perpetual and the agreement is maintained (Greenaway, 2017).



4. Who Should Hold the Easement?

Land trusts should hold easements rather than municipalities as land trusts are specifically dedicated to the long-term conservation of lands, whereas municipalities often have shifting interests and priorities. This distinction was particularly evident in the case of the Pickering Airport lands.

In 1972, the federal government expropriated 18,600 acres of land for the developed of an airport, a project that was largely opposed by residents, farmers and environmental groups (Slater, 2025; Green, 2023). The project was halted in 1975 when the provincial government of Ontario withdrew from the agreement to provide infrastructure (Slater, 2025). Since then, the fate of the land has remained uncertain, a portion was transferred to Parks Canada, while federal government retained ownership of 8,700 acres (Slater, 2025). For nearly 50 years, these lands remained in limbo, with shifting political interests threatening the land's long-term preservation (Omstead, 2025).

In early 2025, Justin Trudeau announced that the remaining lands would be transferred to Parks Canada to expand the Rouge National Urban Park, ensuring that the land will be dedicated to conservation and agriculture for the foreseeable future (Green, 2023). This resolution, although a positive one, highlights a key problem with municipalities holding easements, local governments can be swayed by short term political pressures or shifting priorities (Kwasniak, 2009). Had municipalities overseen these lands, it is possible that shifting political priorities could have led to these lands being dedicated to other development projects.

Municipalities, by their nature, are subject to immediate economic considerations, political cycles, and changes in leadership, which are standard government functions (Hackman-Carty, et al. 2022). Land trusts, by contrast, have an unwavering focus on the preservation of both natural features and farmland, removed from outside local economic and political pressures (OLTA,n.d-b). Ultimately land Trusts are better equipped to hold easements and ensure the long-term preservation of land.



<https://farmtario.com/news/land-spends-half-century-under-expropriation-shadow/>

5. Land Ownership and Stewardship

Land trusts may choose to purchase ecologically significant lands for several reasons, depending on their purpose, motives, and organization type. During the mid 1980's, many land trusts were created with the goal of preserving and maintaining several wilderness and ecologically vulnerable lands in their given areas (Bunce & Aslam, 2016). For example, the Thickson's Woods Land Trust was formed in 1983 in Whitby, Ontario, and their purpose was to preserve old-growth white pines from logging (Thickson's Woods Land Trust, 2024). This was accomplished through the fundraising efforts of multiple local naturalists who came together to purchase and pay off the mortgage of what is now known as the first natural area to have been listed on the Ontario Nature Trust Alliance registry (Thickson's Woods Land Trust, 2024). Another example is the Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation, which is a community-based non-profit organization founded in Baysville, Ontario by area residents in 1985. Their purpose was to conserve the natural, built, and cultural heritage of their area, which was successful due to their connections with other conservation groups (Bunce & Aslam, 2016).

By owning properties, conservation land trusts can protect high risk habitats, engage in ecosystem restoration activities, and enable projects which allow ecosystems to store and capture carbon, resulting in a positive impact on climate change, through participating in programs such as the Nature Smart Climate Solutions fund (Ontario Land Trust Alliance [OLTA], 2024a). The Nature Smart Climate Solutions (NSCS) fund is made possible due to funding support from Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) with the goal of helping Canada meet its 2030 and 2050 climate change mitigation objectives by reducing the loss, restoring, and improving the management of ecosystems (ECCC, 2025). ECCC has committed \$1.4 billion over ten years to the fund to encourage natural climate solutions while benefitting both human and nature's wellbeing (ECCC, 2025). By accessing this funding, land trusts benefit to ease financial burdens often associated with their environmental protection projects, allowing the land trusts to focus on the important projects they are doing without needing to find time to fundraise as well. Funding also enables land trusts to undertake projects which may have been otherwise impossible due to financial barriers.



Both photos: Elliott Conservation Easement Agreement, Kawartha Land Trust

In addition to supporting climate resilience and fostering climate change mitigation actions, land trusts also play a vital role in fostering community connections to nature, protecting and supporting indigenous practices, allowing equitable access to nature, and protecting biodiversity (OLTA, 2024b). Land trusts allow the public access to nature, which has proven health benefits related to physical activity, stress reduction, and mental health (OLTA, 2024b). By connecting people with nature, they experience first-hand the benefits of protecting it, learning about how the environment positively impacts both water and air quality, which often encourages them to make a concerted effort to minimize their impact on the natural world around them (OLTA, 2024b). Increasing Indigenous Peoples access to land owned by land trusts builds important relationships which restore traditional land use practices and increase access to traditional territories (OLTA, 2024b). Through learning how to work together, land trusts and Indigenous communities are furthering reconciliation efforts through advocating for treaty rights and Indigenous land rights, which in turn is fostering cultural revitalization efforts between Indigenous youth and elders (OLTA, 2024b). Finally, land trusts play a vital role in protecting biodiversity by creating and preserving wildlife habitat and corridors from mounting development pressures (OLTA, 2024b). These efforts serve to minimize conflicts between humans and wildlife, and they also serve to facilitate partnerships between various stakeholders to ensure the long-term viability of conservation efforts (OLTA, 2024b).



6. Financial Considerations

The financial responsibility for easement setup costs can be substantial; however, they may be shared between the land trust and the landowner, depending on the circumstances (OFT, n.d.-c). Land trusts rely on multiple funding sources, including fundraising efforts, government grants, and private donations to support both the establishment of conservation easements and their long-term stewardship goals (Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts, n.d.). While specific projects may receive government funding from provincial and federal programs, land trusts themselves engage in ongoing fundraising efforts to ensure long-term financial viability (Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts, n.d.).

In some cases, fundraising efforts help offset costs, making easements a more accessible option for landowners (OFT, n.d.-c). In addition to external funding from either provincial or federal grants, private donors may contribute financial resources to land trusts. Funding sources often differ from project to project. For example, the Georgian Bay Land Trust received provincial funding through the Greenlands Conservation Partnership Program and federal funding through Canada's Nature Fund which was then used to purchase land from the Township of Georgian Bay (Township of Georgian Bay, 2024). Land trusts require funding for specific project set up and maintenance in addition to ongoing operations and land securement outreach initiatives, which is why ongoing support from multiple sources is so important.



Landowners may be interested to know that there are multiple tax benefits available to them when entering into an Easement Agreement that can help to make this agreement a financially beneficial option (OFT, n.d.-c). As the presence of an easement is deemed to affect the market value of a property, landowners are compensated with a charitable tax receipt for the difference (Stevenson, 2011). An appraisal is used to determine the difference in fair market value with and without the easement in place, with the easement treated as a charitable donation to the land trust (OFT, n.d.-c). If the property is considered to have significant natural features such as forests or wetlands, the easement donation may also be eligible for tax benefits through the Ecological Gifts Program available through Environment and Climate Change Canada (OFT, n.d.-c). Individuals receive a non-refundable tax credit while corporations can deduct the donation from taxable income (GOC, 2024b). Unlike other charitable gifts, there is no donation limit, and unclaimed amounts can be carried forward for 10 years (GOC, 2024b). Donors also benefit from a full exemption from capital gains tax, making Ecological Gifts a financially beneficial conservation tool (GOC, 2024b). These tax benefits help incentivize these agreements and offset some of the costs associated with the donations.



7. Costs of a Conservation Easement

Establishing a conservation easement involves both initial setup costs and ongoing administrative costs to ensure long-term enforcement and stewardship of the agreement. Costs can vary widely depending on the complexity of the easement, the professional services required, and the location (OLTA, 2008). The costs associated with setting up a conservation easement are unique to each agreement, as each easement is tailored to the specific property and conservation objectives (OLTA, 2008). Key costs for both land trusts and landowners to consider include legal fees, accounting and tax planning, staff time or landowner time, administrative costs, and costs associated with writing a Baseline Documentation Report.



The initial drafting of a conservation easement requires both the land trusts and the landowners to consult with their own lawyers to develop a legally binding agreement (Good & Michalsky, 2011). Likewise, with the tax implications of conservation, professional advice from accountants or tax specialists may also be necessary on the landowner's behalf (Good & Michalsky, 2011). Both the land trust and the landowner may incur costs related to staff time for coordinating the agreement, handling documentation, and engaging in correspondence (Good & Michalsky, 2011). Additionally, to identify and outline the conservation values protected throughout the agreement, a Baseline Documentation Report is required (Attridge & Schmolka, 2020). This report is typically prepared using the services of land surveyors or other professionals at an additional cost to the land trust (Attridge & Schmolka, 2020). Other administrative costs for the land trust to consider would be any additional document preparation, mapping, or other assessments as may be required (Good & Michalsky, 2011). These costs vary depending on factors such as property location and complexity.

For a conservation easement to be an effective long-term conservation tool, the agreement must be actively monitored and enforced by the land trust (OLTA, 2012). Both the landowner and the land trust have ongoing financial responsibilities for the continued stewardship of the property. Landowners remain responsible for the general maintenance of their property, which may include infrastructure upkeep, habitat restoration, and other land management activities (OLTA, 2012). Land trusts have a significant ongoing financial responsibility and must engage in activities such as monitoring site visits, landowner relations, stewardship activities, enforcement of agreements, and other administrative activities (OLTA, 2012). A minimum of one site visit per year is typically recommended to ensure compliance with the terms of the easement agreement, in addition to ongoing communication with landowners (OLTA, 2012). If a violation occurs, legal action may be required, leading to potential legal fees and enforcement costs for both the land trust and landowner (OLTA, 2012). These activities incur costs associated with staff time, travel expenses, reporting, and purchasing of any necessary supplies required to bring the property into compliance with the easement agreement. It is important for both land trusts and landowners to assess their capacity to sustain long-term stewardship responsibilities and ensure they have sufficient resources to meet these legal obligations (OLTA, 2012).



8. Tax Incentives & Benefits

As previously stated, many landowners may not be aware of the financial benefits associated with either a conservation easement or a land donation, which gives municipal staff the opportunity to share this information with them. Financial benefits can come in the following forms, depending on the agreement or donation that is agreed upon:

- Income tax credit
- Capital gains tax reduction or elimination
- Property tax reduction or elimination

8.a. Conservation Land Tax Incentive Program

In Ontario, the Conservation Land Tax Incentive Program (CLTIP) is a program which exempts eligible sections of properties from up to 100% of the applicable property tax, if specific criteria are met (Government of Ontario, 2024). The CLTIP encourages and supports the long-term private stewardship of some of Ontario's most important natural areas (Government of Ontario, 2024; Attridge, 2024). Each spring, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) will mail applications to all registered property owners of properties which have been identified as being eligible for the CLTIP, however, landowners who believe their properties are eligible are encouraged to reach out to the MNR (Government of Ontario, 2024). If the application is approved, the landowner will see the tax reduction on their municipal tax bill. To continue to receive the tax reduction, the landowners must apply each year and continue to abide by the provincial program policies (Government of Ontario, 2024).

8.b. Farmland Easement Agreements and Donations

Similar to the easement agreements previously mentioned, a method of conserving farmland specifically is for landowners to enter into a farmland easement agreement with a charitable organization, more specifically a land trust, such as the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT, n.d.-a). Farmland owners who enter into easement agreements with OFT receive compensation in the form of a tax receipt for the difference between the property's fair market value prior to the easement being put into place and the fair market value after the easement has been registered on title, as determined by a qualified appraiser (OFT, n.d.-a). The value of the easement is considered a charitable donation to OFT (OFT, n.d.-a).

Landowners or their estate are also able to donate their land to and receive a charitable receipt for the fair market value of their donated property (OFT, n.d.-b). If the landowner is interested in donating their property while continuing to live on it, they may enter into a “life interest” agreement with a land trust which lasts for a specified term (Bruce Trail Conservancy, 2024). A tax receipt is issued for the fair market value of the property, less the value of the life interest agreement, which can be applied against personal income tax, for up to five years (Bruce Trail Conservancy, 2024). Finally, if a landowner wants to donate their property outright to a land trust, a transfer of ownership is done through a fee simple donation of land (OFT, n.d.-b).

In some cases, it is possible to receive multiple tax benefits for one piece of property. For example, if a farmland easement agreement is registered on the property prior to the fee simple donation, two charitable tax receipts are issued (OFT, n.d.-b). The first will be issued once the easement agreement has been completed in the amount equal to the difference in the fair market value of the property before and after the easement has been registered, and the second will be issued for the remaining fair market value of the property once the fee simple land donation has been completed (OFT, n.d.-b). It is also possible to receive a tax receipt for an easement agreement and additional tax benefits through the Ecological Gifts Program (OFT, n.d.-a).



8.c. Ecological Gifts Program

An important financial incentive in Canadian conservation efforts, the Ecological Gifts Program (EGP), is a tax benefit for the donation of ecologically sensitive lands. This program is made possible under provisions in the Income Tax Act of Canada and administered by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) (GOC, 2024a). Land or an eligible interest in land can be donated by any individual or corporate landowner and there are several donation options available. Landowners can retain land ownership while protecting biodiversity and natural heritage in perpetuity through three options: covenants, conservation easements, and servitude agreements (in Quebec). Ecological gifts from landowners can also include donations of full title – these make up more than 60% of donations under the program (GOC, 2024b). Since inception, over 248,000 hectares of wildlife habitat have been protected in Canada as a result of over 1886 ecological gift donations under the program (GOC, 2024b).

Whether a covenant, conservation easement, servitude agreement, or full title donation, all lands must be assessed and meet national (and in some cases regional) criteria of ecological sensitivity to donate under the EGP. National criteria include areas that are identified, designated or protected by a recognized classification system, natural spaces significant to their surrounding environment, sites with ecological value or potential for enhanced ecological value based on proximity, private lands zoned for conservation, natural buffers around environmentally sensitive areas, and lands that contribute to biodiversity or environmental heritage (GOC, 2024b). Successful certification by the federal Minister of the Environment or delegated certification authority results in the issuance of a Certificate of Ecologically Sensitive Land, Recipient Identification, and Registered Charity Approval Pursuant to the Income Tax Act of Canada (GOC, 2024b).

To take advantage tax benefits, a donor requires a Statement of Fair Market Value of an Ecological Gift Pursuant to the Income Tax Act of Canada signed by the Minister of the Environment. To receive this statement, the fair market value of the gift is determined by an appraiser in an application and report that is then approved by the EGP's independent Appraisal Review Panel (GOC, 2024b). The EGP issues a Notice of Determination that the donor may then accept, request a redetermination, or withdraw the application. If the valuation is accepted by the landowner, the final requirement for the tax benefit is to complete the donation.

Donations can be made by landowners to eligible environmental charities and to federal, provincial/territorial, or municipal (or public bodies that perform as municipal) governments. Environmental charities must apply to the ECCC for eligibility and have registered charity status with the Canada Revenue Agency, and primary purposes that espouse the “conservation and protection of Canada’s environmental heritage” and the “acquisition and management of real estate for conservation purposes” (Gov’t of Canada, 2024b). Recipients must issue an official donation receipt to the landowner upon completion of the gift as the final requirement of the tax benefit. Further, the recipient is responsible for the maintenance of biodiversity and environmental heritage of the land in perpetuity.

The EGP uses the value of the gift to determine the eligible amount of the gift as either a non-refundable tax credit to individuals or a deduction from taxable income available to corporations (Gov’t of Canada, 2024b). For individuals, a tax credit at the rate of 15% is applied to the first \$200 and depending on the donor’s income, either 29% or 33% is applied to the balance (Gov’t of Canada, 2024b). Further financial advantages to the program are the elimination of taxable capital gain, the reduction of provincial tax (in most provinces) as a result of reduced federal tax payable, and the unclaimed amount of the total value of the ecological gift eligible for deduction or credit in a given year may be carried forward for up to 10 years (Gov’t of Canada, 2024b). The financial incentives of the EGP support protection and conservation of ecologically sensitive lands, biodiversity and environmental heritage on Turtle Island forever.



9. Steps to Working with Land Trusts

Start:

Step 1: Define Conservation Goals

A municipality needs to determine what the easements should do and what priorities they should focus on. Assessing municipal plans for goals is a good first step.

Step 1.1: Determine Financial Feasibility

Municipalities should consider if they have the resources available to invest in creating their own easement program. Costs associated with holding easements can be shared when partnering with a land trust.

Step 2: Find the right land trust

Find a land trust that matches the conservation goals of the municipality

Step 3: Meet

Land trusts work with a variety of other organizations to secure funding, determine best practices, and develop joint programming. Further partners may include conservancy organizations, professional associations or federations, or other government organizations.

Step 4: Find the right tools

Municipalities should consider how, where, and who will implement the easements, as well as any other programs or tools available. Existing mechanisms such as land acquisition and land dedication through plans of subdivision can work in conjunction with easements to achieve municipal objectives.

Step 5: Establish funding + incentive mechanisms

There are funding incentives for land owners including tax receipts, and a 'net positive flow of funds' for municipalities when some types of land are put into conservation easements

Step 6: Engage the public + landowners

Engaging the public and landowners is important to understanding the motivations of landowners to enter into a conservation easements. Working with land trusts gives municipalities access to their networks, volunteers, and donors.

Step 7: Integrate land trust partnerships into planning + policy frameworks

Identifying that conservation easements have an underlying benefit to the public is a good start, and that can be coordinated with community-based plans for health and well-being, as one example.

Step 8: Evaluate + Monitor

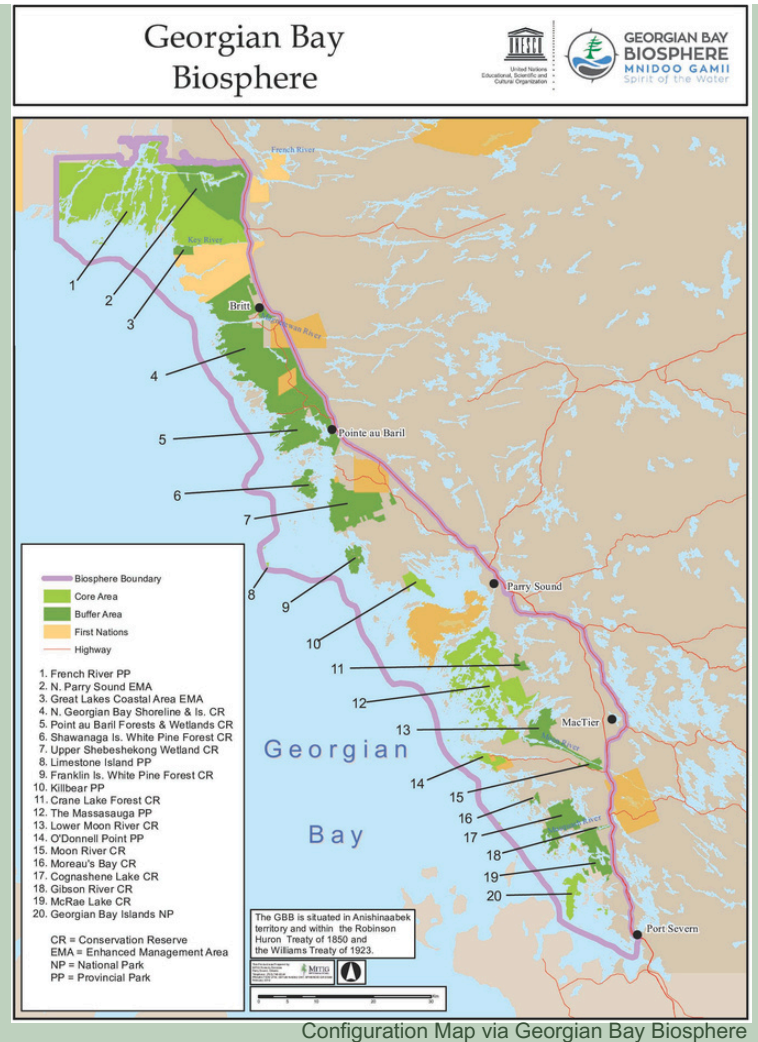
Stewarding the land under easement will require monitoring those requirements set out in the easement document. Enforcing the requirements of the easement will include communicating with parties involved, and reporting back on evaluating the failures and successes of the conservation easement

10. Case Studies

Georgian Bay

The Georgian Bay Land Trust's (GBLT) Corridor Project is a large-scale preservation initiative in the Georgian Bay area that makes use of conservation easement agreements with local municipalities to protect large tracts of ecologically significant land (GBLT, 2024). Eastern Georgian Bay has been a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Biosphere Reserve since 2004 due to its unique ecology as a freshwater archipelago, which provides habitat for more than 50 species of risk and migratory bird species (Georgian Bay Biosphere, n.d.). The Corridor Project currently protects around 32,900 acres of land, with 553 acres being municipal land within the Township of Georgian Bay (GBLT, 2024). The project focus on partnerships with municipalities and Indigenous communities to implement conservation easement agreements makes it unique among land trusts, and a useful case study for examining how these collaborations function.

Currently, the GBLT has executed agreements with the Township of Georgian Bay and is in the process of negotiating agreements with the Township of the Archipelago. The agreement with Georgian Bay secured the protection of 553 acres of municipal land and 32,900 acres of Crown Land (Township of Georgian Bay, 2024). The initial proposal was to establish easements along unopened road allowances abutting Crown Lands, resulting in a continuous network of land protected by the Township's Official Plan, Crown Land, and existing conservation reserves (Township of Georgian Bay, 2022). These agreements were executed in direct consultation with Indigenous communities, and collaboration with Moose Deer Point First Nation ensured the preservation of Indigenous rights and cultural values; in particular, the exclusion of lands under claim by the First Nation from easements supports Indigenous sovereignty and hunting and gathering rights are protected within easements through a 999-year agreement (GBLT, 2024; Loughheed, 2022). Building on this successful partnership, GBLT is currently working with the Township of the Archipelago to place similar easements along unopened road allowances in the Township (Township of the Archipelago, 2024). Successful conservation of lands through easements requires fostering relationships and consulting with a variety of partners to develop robust stewardship initiatives.



Configuration Map via Georgian Bay Biosphere

Georgian Bay

As the Corridor Project is recent and ongoing, specific challenges and failures are difficult to identify; however, it is worth discussing factors that contributed to the success of the project and potential problems that may become relevant in the future. The provision of funding for large-scale conservation projects presents a significant hurdle to implementation for both land trusts and municipalities. Major funding for this project was secured through Canada's Nature Fund and Ontario's Greenlands Conservation Partnership Program, which provided \$580,000 and \$254,000 respectively (GBLT, 2024). Depending on the conservation priorities of the project (i.e. ecology vs. farmland), funding may not be available through government programs, and municipalities and land trusts would be reliant on fundraising or municipal budgeting to reach conservation goals. Municipalities seeking to enter easement agreements as a landowner must also be cognizant of the rigidity and permanence of easements - as agreements are placed on the title of the land, they may lower the market value of the land if the municipality wished to sell it in the future (Attridge & Schmolka, 2020). Similarly, any modifications to or removal of the easement agreement requires consent from both the easement holder and the landowner, which contributes to both their value as a tool for long-term preservation of land and the risk to municipalities that may face changing land use needs (Attridge & Schmolka, 2020).



Thom Morrissey Photography via Georgian Bay Biosphere

Key Points

- Georgian Bay Land Trust, the Township of Georgian Bay, and the Township of the Archipelago shared similar conservation goals for this ecologically significant area
- Placement of easements on municipal and Crown lands protected more than 32,900 acres of land which, in combination with existing protections, creates a contiguous protected corridor
- Collaboration with Indigenous groups and local First Nations ensured the preservation of Indigenous rights and traditional uses of the land
- Funding mechanisms like the Nature Fund and Greenlands Conservation Partnership Program are focused on specific environmental conservation goals, and may only be available to charitable organizations such as land trusts
- Municipalities should consider the permanent nature of easements when seeking to partner with land trusts as a landowner

Site 41, Tiny Township



Site 41, photo via Ontario Farmland Trust

The conservation easement agreements with the OFT placed on the North Simcoe Landfill Site (Site 41) in 2011 represent the culmination of decades of public protest against the landfill. Proposed as the site of a future landfill in 1986 and receiving provisional approval from the Ministry of the Environment (now Ministry of the Environment, Conservation, and Parks) in 1998, the site sits atop the Alliston aquifer - which holds some of the cleanest water in the world - and contains some of the best farmland in Simcoe County (Morgan, 2014; OFT, n.d.; Barrie Advance, 2009).

Driven by concerns over water quality and farmland loss when construction on the site started in 2009, residents of Tiny Township, the Beausoleil First Nation, and local farmers collaborated to coordinate demonstrations, such as the Walk for Water march; Anishinaabe Kweag, women from the Beausoleil First Nations, were instrumental in successfully opposing the landfill. Their camp, on a nearby farm, lasted 139 days and maintained a sacred fire that would burn until the project was cancelled (Calzavara, 2009). A year-long moratorium on construction on the site was enacted in 2009, and in May 2010 plans for the landfill were cancelled and approval was revoked (Barrie Advance, 2010). The OFT became involved in future plans for the site in 2011, after the lands were declared surplus and rezoned to Agricultural use and County staff were directed to investigate the process for placing conservation easements on the land (Hipwell, 2011).

The County registered easement agreements with the OFT in November of 2011, protecting two of the three farm parcels the county intended to sell (Parcels A and B, Figure 1), with the third set aside for potential use as an agricultural and water quality research station (Hipwell, 2011). Agreement on easement conditions required compromise from both the land trust and municipality, as the OFT had to alter their definition of Agriculture to allow farm dwellings and accessory structures; similarly, restrictions in the easement agreement “may [have gone] beyond what Council intended” in their severity (Hipwell, 2011).



Figure 1: Site 41 aerial, courtesy of M. Straathof

Site 41, Tiny Township

These restrictions included prohibiting the construction of duplexes or semi-detached dwellings, as well as restricting alterations to topography, construction of roads or trails, commercial fishing or hunting, and the removal of native plants; it also required consent for the trust for severances, building of structures, and granting of additional easements (Hipwell, 2011). To enable the project, the County was required to enact a bylaw that allowed them to enter into easement agreements, and the placement of easements on the two parcels resulted in the loss of \$58,760 and \$39,450 to appraised value, a significant difference from the original appraisal values (Hipwell, 2011). Agreements on the third parcel were registered with OFT in 2013 (M. Straathof, personal communication, March 13, 2025).



Site 41, photo via Ontario Farmland Trust

Presently, the OFT holds easements for the three farm properties, totalling 300 acres, to ensure the land remains in agricultural production, preserving both the farmland and groundwater (OFT, n.d.-d). The partnership between the OFT and Simcoe County was the first of its kind in Ontario and marked a new potential avenue for farmland preservation. Current owners of the land are undertaking significant efforts to return the farms to agricultural production, which is made difficult due to the construction that had already taken place, including dykes and gravel parking pads (OFT, 2020). The success of the easement project built on the long history of public protest against the landfill development, and required collaboration and compromise from both the land trust and municipality to meet the community's conservation goals.

Key Points

- These easements were only made possible because of decades of public push-back against the landfill development
- Concerns regarding water quality and farmland loss that surrounded the development were able to be adequately addressed through the placement of easements - they are a flexible tool that can be used to address more than ecological conservation
- Conditions in the easement agreement can be negotiated and vary in severity - there is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating an easement
- Compromise is needed if the land trust and municipality's conservation goals are not aligned
- Easements may lower the value of the land they are placed on
- Placing easements does not solve all problems related to development, and a reactive easement such as this may require remediation work to bring lands to their intended state

11. Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, land trusts and municipalities both play a major role when it comes to working with landowners to ensure the long-term protection of not only the land, but the ecological resources on the land as well. While there are many benefits to municipalities and landowners who choose to work with land trusts, these agreements should not be entered into lightly. There are many factors which should be considered by all parties before signing the legally binding conservation easement or ecological gift agreements, and a thorough consultation period is recommended. Despite the potential challenges that come with the initial establishment and ongoing maintenance of such agreements or land transfers, land trusts remain one of the best and most secure ways to ensure that land is protected both now and into the future.



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