



# URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARIES IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION

## Lessons Learned for Winnipeg

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CASE  
IN  
POINT

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### Abstract

Urban growth boundaries are boundaries put in place to restrict development and growth to a particular area of a city or region. While these boundaries have been implemented in many cities across Canada, they are uncommon in prairie cities, including Winnipeg.

The City of Ottawa has a long history with urban growth boundaries, which began with the creation of the Capital Greenbelt that surrounds the old City of Ottawa. More recently, the amalgamated city has incorporated an urban boundary that provides important lessons for the City of Winnipeg.

# Introduction

Urban growth boundaries are a growth management policy which establishes lines around urban areas to restrict development and growth to the area within the boundary, while also restricting or otherwise discouraging additional growth outside the boundary lines (NAHB, 2018). These boundaries were established in light of the growing concern regarding the issue of ‘urban sprawl,’ which many argue contributes to a car-dependent culture, to the loss of natural and agricultural land and to increased overall energy consumption in the city. As a result, urban growth boundaries have been seen as a tool to prevent the sprawl of cities by restricting the physical boundary of where development can occur.

Urban growth boundaries have been implemented in many cities around the world, including notable examples such as Portland, Oregon and Toronto, Ontario. In Canada, urban growth boundaries have been implemented in major cities including Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa. Prairies cities, including the City of Winnipeg, are notable for not having any urban growth boundary policies set in place. This Case-in-Point explores Ottawa’s urban growth boundary policies and identifies the lessons that can be learned from this case study, particularly regarding the potential implementation in the City of Winnipeg.

## **FIGURE 1 (COVER)**

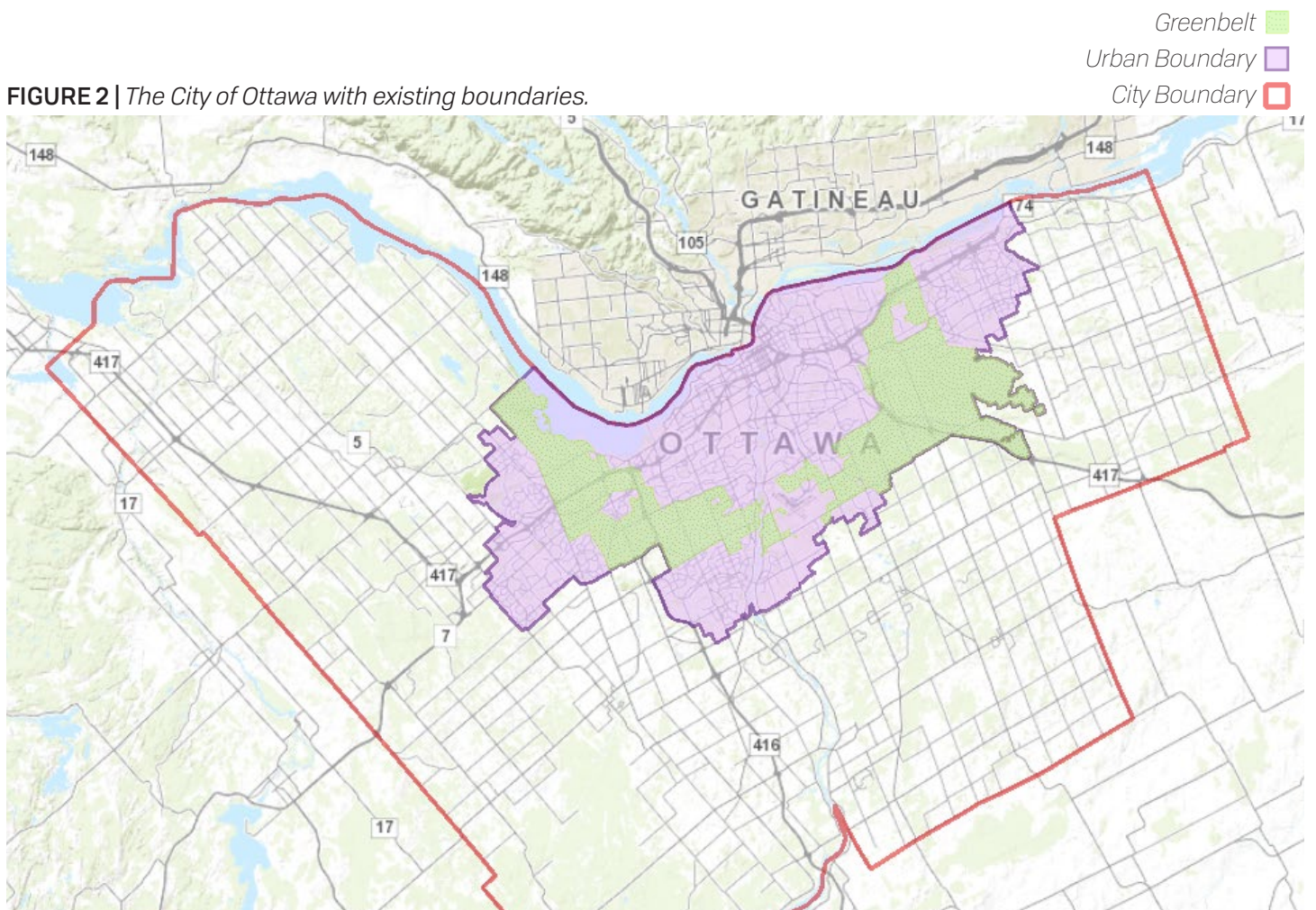
*Orthophoto of the Kanata suburb of Ottawa beside the protected National Capital Greenbelt.*



# Background & Context

Overlooking the Ottawa River at the forks with the Rideau River, the City of Ottawa is the national capital of Canada and has been so since confederation in 1867. The city is located at the heart of the National Capital Region, with additional municipalities such as the City of Gatineau in Quebec located in the surrounding areas (City of Ottawa, 2003). The City of Ottawa is itself the largest municipality in Canada's Capital Region, which is a region of comparable size to the entirety of Prince Edward Island (City of Ottawa, 2003).

The city itself is a mix of urban and rural areas spanning over 2796 km<sup>2</sup>, which exists as a result of the city's amalgamation with adjacent suburban and rural areas in 2001 (City of Ottawa, 2016). While Ottawa is known as a populous city with a population of almost 1 million people, the majority of the city's land area remains rural to this day (City of Ottawa, 2003).



# Facts of the Case

## The National Capital Greenbelt

The City of Ottawa was amalgamated in 2001 from the municipalities that previously made up the Region of Ottawa-Carleton, including the old City of Ottawa, to create the current boundaries we see today. The new city of Ottawa incorporates an urban growth boundary into its Official Plan in order to limit the potential for urban sprawl (City of Ottawa, 2003). This was not the first instance of a growth boundary being implemented in the region. The first urban growth boundary dates back to the 1950s, with the creation of the National Capital Greenbelt.

In the 1950s, Jacques Greber created the plan for the National Capital which planned out several federal office complexes and parkways

within the city. The Capital Plan also prompted the creation of the National Capital Greenbelt which was planned as a 20,000-hectare greenspace that would completely surround the Ontario side of the old City of Ottawa (City of Ottawa, 2003). The Greenbelt was designed at the city's first urban growth boundary. Its intention was to assist in containing the urban growth of the capital region while also preserving the natural landscape near the nation's capital.

The Greenbelt has existed since the 1950s and has remained a protected natural area under federal jurisdiction since then. As a protected area, new development cannot occur within the Greenbelt, leaving the landscape to be preserved as a natural habitat. As a nature reserve, the Greenbelt has been considered very successful,

**FIGURE 3** | *Mer Bleue Bog in the National Capital Greenbelt.*





as the natural landscape has been successfully maintained since its creation, although there are some areas in the Greenbelt that contradict this mandate including the Ottawa International Airport (Egan, 2012). The Greenbelt's additional intention of acting as an urban growth boundary, however, was not as successful. When it was created, the Greenbelt was placed outside the built-up urban area of the city of Ottawa, with the intention being that urban development would remain inside that built up area and not expand outwards outside the boundary. With increased car dependence, farther travel distances were possible, therefore making further suburban communities more feasible. By the 1960s, suburban development began outside the Greenbelt and has been continuing since, with Ottawa's newest neighbourhoods being located outside of the Greenbelt boundaries (City of Ottawa, 2003).

The Greenbelt was created as a federally protected nature preserve. The land dedicated for the Greenbelt has been preserved by the National Capital Commission, a federally mandated body (NCC, 2018). As a result, the local authority has little control over what can occur in this area. Additionally, while the Greenbelt is a federal policy governing this area of land in the Ottawa region, there appears to have been little policy on any level of government – federal, provincial or municipal – that regulated the physical growth of the built-up urban area. As the municipal governments were separate at the time, policies

in the City of Ottawa did not extend to the rural areas outside the city limits, meaning that policies made within the city proper only affected the city itself. As a result of the lack of regional level policy, outlying municipalities, such as Nepean and Kanata, began to grow outside the Greenbelt. These communities saw development as early as the 1960s and have been growing steadily ever since. Today, these outer communities are home to Ottawa's newest suburban neighbourhoods as the developable land within the Greenbelt becomes sparser (Ottawa Insights, 2018).

**FIGURE 4 |** *The National Capital Greenbelt.*

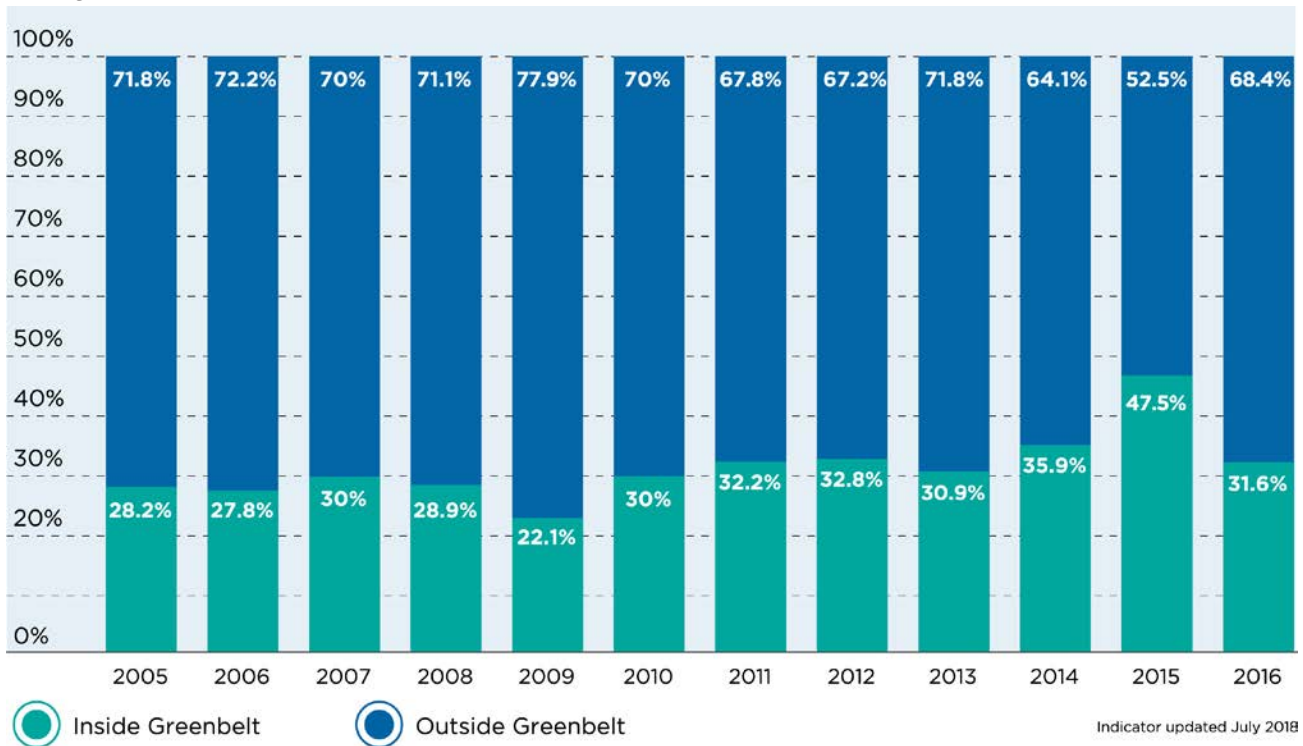


## Post-amalgamation

The National Capital Greenbelt was originally created to surround the City of Ottawa, ultimately separating it from outlying municipalities within the capital region. As noted, the idea was that the Greenbelt would not only act as the region’s urban limit but also provide a natural landscape on the edge of the city. The Greenbelt did not effectively succeed in managing the urban sprawl of the region (Egan, 2012; City of Ottawa, 2003). Soon after its creation, new developments began appearing outside the Greenbelt’s outer boundary in the region’s more rural or suburban municipalities.

The Region of Ottawa-Carleton remained in effect through until the end of the 20th century. In 1999, the municipalities passed a resolution that would amalgamate the municipalities into a single local government. In 2001, the City of Ottawa officially amalgamated with the adjacent municipalities on the Ontario side of the region to create the new and currently existing City of Ottawa boundaries (City of Ottawa, 2003). Under the new city boundaries, the majority of the city’s land area is now rural, with almost 90% of the developable land in the city being rural/ agricultural. Additionally, the Greenbelt, which formerly was on the outer limits of the city, is now entirely within the City limits, with significant land area located outside the Greenbelt’s outer boundary.

**FIGURE 5**  
New Housing Inside and Outside the Greenbelt, 2005-2016



As part of the amalgamated municipality, the City of Ottawa created an Official Plan, which is the overarching development policy for the municipality. Within this policy, the city has adopted an official urban growth boundary to limit the urban growth of the city and preserve the rural areas. This policy also incorporated village boundaries to acknowledge the small village communities in the rural areas of the city, while also ensuring that they do not grow into large suburban communities as what happened with the former cities of Kanata and Nepean. The new urban growth boundary includes all the former cities in the region, including those outside the Greenbelt, which also means that the Greenbelt itself is also entirely located within the urban growth boundary, although development remains restricted in this area. This official urban growth boundary policy states that about 90% of all future

growth of the city, in terms of population, jobs and housing, will be accommodated within the areas designated inside the urban boundary drawn within the plan. Today, 81% of this land inside the boundary has been developed, not including the lands restricted inside the National Capital Greenbelt. Most new development is occurring outside the Greenbelt (City of Ottawa, 2003).

In the post amalgamated city, the entire urban region is now located under a single local municipality, instead of the many municipalities that previously made up the region of Ottawa-Carleton. As a result, the urban growth boundary is now being controlled by a single entity, rather than requiring a regional body to regulate the boundary. As a result, there is the opportunity for more enforceability of the boundary as only one governmental body is regulating development. While collaboration between municipalities might have previously occurred, the enforceability may have differed across municipal lines.

**FIGURE 6** | *Ottawa City Hall*





# Outcomes

Prior to amalgamation, the National Capital Greenbelt was the primary tool for curbing urban growth in the region, effectively acting as the growth boundary to the city of Ottawa. The Greenbelt did very little to combat urban sprawl outside the city limits, as many new developments continued to occur outside the Greenbelt. However, the Greenbelt maintains significant natural environment within close proximity to the city and has been a successful example of growth boundaries acting in the interest of environmental protection. While the Greenbelt was a federal initiative, there was little policy to prevent growth on the local level, which allowed for the outward sprawl beyond the belt's limits to occur.

In the post amalgamated city, the current urban boundary has been more effective in preventing urban sprawl, although pressures to expand the boundaries can undermine its effectiveness. The single level of government has ensured that the boundary is more enforceable across the region, especially as the boundary exists within official policy documents in the city. As the city grows, there may be a need for future allocation of lands to occur in the city, which is being seen in the city already. News articles have noted that the city is always under pressure to expand the growth boundary to allow for new growth, which is emphasized by the fact the over 80% of the land within the boundary is already developed (CBC News, 2011; White, 2009; Martin, 2013). In this instance, much of the new development would be required to be infill development. Should the demand for more greenfield, suburban development occur, new lands may need to be allocated to the urban limits to allow for future growth.

**FIGURE 7 |** *New Development in Kanata, Ottawa.*





# Lessons Learned

Several lessons can be learned from the City of Ottawa and its implementation of urban growth boundaries throughout the years.

The first is the concept of development ‘leapfrogging.’ This was the unintended consequence of the Greenbelt, where developments almost immediately began appearing outside the Greenbelt’s perimeter. In a sense, while the Greenbelt preserved natural environments near the city’s core, it also pushed development further outside the city, contributing to a wider sprawl than initially anticipated. As Winnipeg continues to grow, bedroom communities in the rural municipalities outside the city’s perimeter have become increasingly desirable places to settle (Froese, 2019). These communities fall outside the city proper limits and are predicted to be the highest rate of growth across the entire Winnipeg Census Metropolitan Area, with a growth rate over the next 25 years of 77% (City of Winnipeg, 2016). If the city were to establish a city level growth boundary to preserve

their remaining agricultural land, this may push additional development outside the city into these already in demand municipalities. This may also occur with a regional urban growth boundary. Although there are different challenges between regional and municipal urban boundaries.

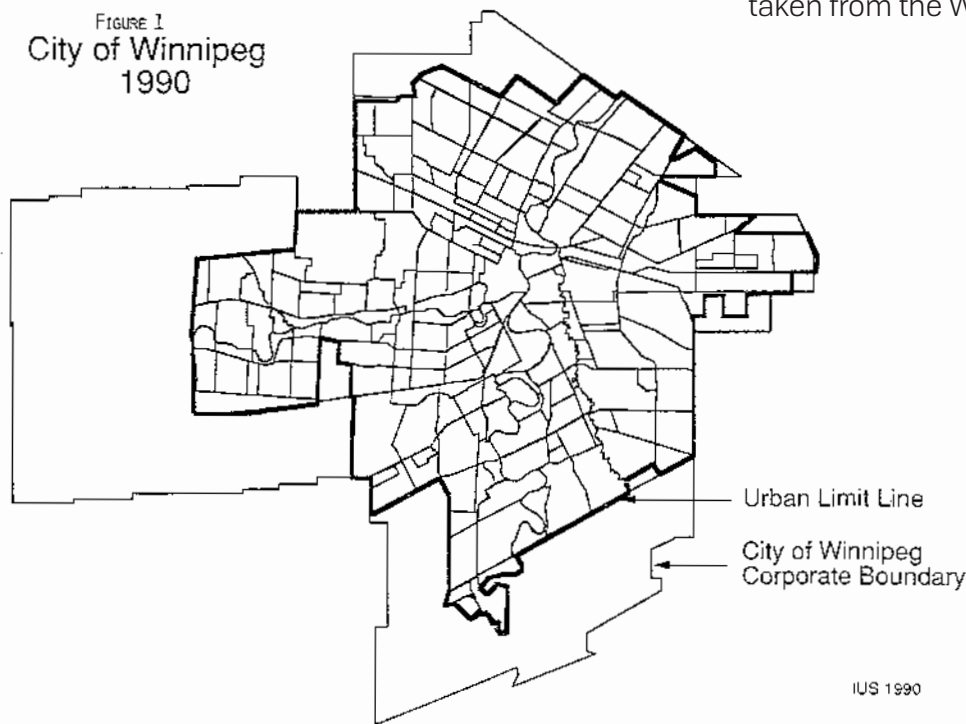
The second lesson learned from Ottawa is the difference between municipal level urban boundaries and regional level urban boundaries. In the case of Ottawa, a municipal level boundary was more effective over the regional boundary but only after the city amalgamated to incorporate a vast amount of rural land surrounding the city core. It is less likely that leapfrogging will occur in this situation. The municipal urban boundary also ensures that there is only a single government policy and enforcement, making it easier to regulate and change. With the Greenbelt, the Greenbelt policy was federal, but any additional growth boundary provisions had to be made locally, which allowed for growth to continue happening outside the boundary.

	Expected Population Growth	
	Over Next	
	10 Years (2015-2025)	25 Years (2015-2040)
Winnipeg CMA	117,900	272,900 (+33%)
City of Winnipeg	96,900	213,400 (+28%)
Rest of CMA	20,900	59,500 (+77%)

**FIGURE 8**  
*Expected Population Growth in the Winnipeg Census Metropolitan Area.*

Finally, the case of the city of Ottawa offers insight into the potential challenges when it comes to adding to the Urban Boundary. As the city continues to grow, increases to the boundary may be required. In Ottawa's case, already 80% of the city's urban growth boundary has been development. While infill development can occur, densifying existing areas, there may soon be a need to expand the boundary to include new growth. This is a normal occurrence, as the world continues to urbanize and grow. The question, which has not been thoroughly explored in the case of Ottawa, will be how much new land allocation is appropriate and what will the balance between the new suburban growth and infill growth be? A new Official Plan in Ottawa is currently being developed, which may show future changes to the growth boundary.

Winnipeg previously had an Urban Limit Line incorporated in 1986 into Plan Winnipeg, the preceding development policy to the current OurWinnipeg document, after over six years of development (Institute of Urban Studies, 1991). This line functioned very similarly to an urban growth boundary as it prevented developments from occurring outside the line without having to amend Plan Winnipeg, which would require both City Council approval and Provincial approval. This line was a municipal level boundary and did not consider the great metropolitan region, although exurban communities were much smaller at the time. It was a contentious policy when it was implemented and ultimately does not exist today in Winnipeg's policies. However, if Winnipeg is to consider an urban growth boundary in the future, lessons should not only be taken from external case studies such as Ottawa but should also be taken from the Winnipeg's own past.



**FIGURE 9**  
*The Urban Limit Line shown within the 1990 boundaries of the City of Winnipeg.*



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## Image Sources

Figure 1: Google Maps. <https://www.google.com/maps/@45.2976824,-75.85014,2515m/data=!3m1!1e3>

Figure 2: The City of Ottawa. GeoOttawa. <http://maps.ottawa.ca/geoOttawa/>

Figure 3: cJuneau. Flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/15558406@N03/8169736985>

Figure 4: Wikipedia. Ottawa Greenbelt. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greenbelt\\_Ottawa.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greenbelt_Ottawa.jpg)

Figure 5: Ottawa Insights. 2018

Figure 6: Mobile Syrup. <https://cdn.mobilesyrup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ottawa-city-hall.jpg>

Figure 7: Google Street View. Kanata, Ottawa.

Figure 8: City of Winnipeg. 2016

Figure 9: Institute of Urban Studies, Winnipeg. 1991.