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CONTENTS / TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Tuesday 21 October 2025 / Mardi 21 octobre 2025

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS / AFFAIRES D'INTÉRÊT PUBLIC ÉMANANT DES DÉPUTÉES ET DÉPUTÉS

Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves

**Amendment Act, 2025, Bill 26, Mr. Dowie / Loi de
2025 modifiant la Loi sur les parcs provinciaux et
les réserves de conservation, projet de loi 26,**

M. Dowie

Mr. Andrew Dowie.....	1487
Mr. Peter Tabuns	1488
Mr. Steve Clark.....	1490
MPP Tyler Watt.....	1490
MPP Monica Ciriello.....	1492
Mr. Mike Schreiner.....	1493
Mme France Gélinas.....	1494
Mr. Steve Pinsonneault.....	1494
Mr. Andrew Dowie.....	1494
Second reading agreed to.....	1495

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 21 October 2025

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 21 octobre 2025

Report continued from volume A.

1755

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS

PROVINCIAL PARKS AND CONSERVATION RESERVES AMENDMENT ACT, 2025 LOI DE 2025 MODIFIANT LA LOI SUR LES PARCS PROVINCIAUX ET LES RÉSERVES DE CONSERVATION

Mr. Dowie moved second reading of the following bill:
Bill 26, An Act to amend the Provincial Parks and
Conservation Reserves Act, 2006 / Projet de loi 26, Loi
modifiant la Loi de 2006 sur les parcs provinciaux et les
réserves de conservation.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Pursuant to
standing order 100, the member has 12 minutes for their
presentation.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you very much, Speaker.
It is truly an honour to rise. I believe this is the first time
I've been able to debate since the last election, in this
session. I'm grateful for the opportunity to rise in support
of Bill 26, the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves
Amendment Act, 2025.

Speaker, what I love about this legislation: It represents
an important step forward in how Ontarians can connect
with nature, especially in and around our growing urban
centres, because for decades, Ontario's provincial parks
have offered places of rest, reflection and, truly, renewal.
They are part of who we are.

As our communities grow, the way people experience
nature must also evolve. It has been said that in the United
States national parks were America's best idea, and, ob-
viously, providing places for Ontarians is an idea certainly
worth supporting in our own right. Bill 26 responds to that
need.

In my own community, we're proud to be home to the
proposed Ojibway National Urban Park. This park will
bring together more than 900 hectares of ecologically sig-
nificant land, including the Ojibway Prairie Provincial
Nature Reserve, which has been in existence since the
1970s. It is truly one of the last remaining tall grass prairies
in Canada. It's a landscape rich with biodiversity and
cultural meaning.

This initiative connects us as Windsorites to nature. It
preserves endangered species of all kinds and honours

Indigenous stewardship. It shows, truly, what's possible
when local advocacy, federal and provincial co-operation
and Indigenous leadership come together for a shared pur-
pose: protecting our natural heritage while expanding
access for everyone.

When I walk those trails, I see families; I see
birdwatchers. At one point, in the middle of the winter,
along the municipal drain, I saw someone who had music
playing and someone who was meditating. I've seen
students exploring and getting to see the turtles, sometimes
the bugs, the frogs, and just finding those wonders of life
that you can only find in a natural environment. They're
truly learning about conservation, about coexistence and
about belonging. That's the spirit behind Bill 26.

This bill introduces two new classes of provincial
parks: the urban class parks and the adventure class parks.
These reflect the many ways that Ontarians truly connect
with the outdoors: some through quiet reflection and
others through active recreation.

Let's begin with the urban class parks. They bring
nature closer to where people live and work. Think of that
waterfall that you may see around the corner in some of
our great cities—Hamilton is one that I can think of—
where you have no idea what that path will bring in store.
It makes green space available and accessible to families
who might have to travel long distances and may not have
the time, really, to accommodate it because of life's hustle
and bustle.

The Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park, for example, is
one that the government of Ontario has just enacted
recently. It spans more than 530 hectares on the Oak
Ridges moraine, and offers trails for hiking, cycling and
exploration, while protecting local ecosystems. As the
mayor of Uxbridge, the great Worship Dave Barton said,
"Urban parks can and should be vibrant, welcoming
spaces that complement the natural landscape while at-
tracting people in—to walk, bike, ski, explore and connect
with each other and the land."

Mayor Barton's vision captures exactly what urban
parks are meant to achieve: places that are not fenced from
our lives but are woven into our communities. We have
already seen this sort of approach succeed. Rouge National
Urban Park, Canada's first national urban park, spans over
79 square kilometres of forests, wetlands and farmland.
It's accessible by public transit and used by schools as a
living classroom.

1800

In our system, we have Bronte Creek Provincial Park,
which has been around for just over four decades. It's
located in Oakville and it's another model, with its historic

Spruce Lane Farmhouse, children's play barn and a trail network that blends heritage, recreation and nature. This is not necessarily a natural landscape for its entire footprint. There's certainly nature there, but there's a whole lot more about how we see ourselves and the recreational opportunities on site at that particular park. These examples really remind us that protecting nature doesn't mean keeping people out. It means inviting them in responsibly.

The second innovation that's being proposed through Bill 26 is the adventure class park that supports activities like rock climbing, mountain biking, kayaking and snowmobiling. Motorized vehicles have a place in the recreation system, but they need to be managed carefully to preserve natural integrity.

There's nothing better than learning how to be a steward. And you know what? Those who spend a lot of time in the outdoors are our best stewards. They're our best advocates for protecting the biodiversity that we have. Through adventure, it's another way that people build a connection with the land because when people play in nature, they come to care for it.

The Association of Consulting Engineering Companies Ontario put it well for me in a letter of support. It says, "Your bill would help provide access to conservation areas for those that live in dense urban settings ... making both the adventure and urban class of parks a reality will help Ontario to become an even better place to work, live and play."

And one of the greatest organizations that we have in the province of Ontario, the Ontario Conservation Accelerator, added, "The need for equitable and widespread access to nature has never been more urgent.... This bill represents an exciting opportunity for the government of Ontario to demonstrate its leadership in conservation."

They all remind us that partnerships between governments, conservation groups and Indigenous communities can amplify impact. By working together, we can make sure these new parks are inclusive, sustainable and accessible for all.

Peter Kendall of the Schad Foundation shared this observation. Mr. Kendall says, "I have been amazed by the incredible trail systems, adventure playgrounds, outdoor art installations, bike parks ... every park was packed with people of all ages no matter the weather. This bill represents an exciting opportunity for Ontario to build on its leadership in park development." He also reminded us that public investments can be matched by private and community partners, as we have seen in Uxbridge. That means every provincial dollar can go further, create more trails, better facilities and, truly, stronger communities.

Bill 26 also gives Ontario the ability to create new park classes through regulation. This ensures flexibility as public needs change, because our understanding of conservation must keep pace with the challenges that we have, like climate change, urban growth and, really, shifting recreational patterns. I mean, who saw pickleball six or seven years ago, right? This adaptability ensures that our parks remain resilient, responsive and relevant for decades to come.

Closer to home, we have the Ojibway National Urban Park. And it reminds us of what this bill is truly about: It's a connection, a connection between people and land, between the past and the future, between Indigenous knowledge and modern stewardship.

When students walk those trails, they learn more than just the ecology of the land. They learn responsibility. And when Indigenous elders share teachings on that land, they pass on wisdom about respect and reciprocity. That is reconciliation in action, and that's what Bill 26 seeks to foster access to across Ontario.

Bill 26 is truly more than a policy amendment. It's a vision for how Ontarians will experience nature in the 21st century. It says that access to green space is not a privilege; it is a right and a shared responsibility. By supporting this bill, we ensure that every Ontarian, no matter where they live, can experience the wonder of nature, but can also experience the wonder of exhilaration and adventure, that you can be supportive of the outdoors and really have fun while you're doing it, and there is a place for recreation in our provincial parks system. We ensure that our park system remains inclusive, innovative and strong, and we affirm that Ontario will continue to lead the country in conservation and in community well-being.

Let us embrace this opportunity, Speaker, to build a park system that celebrates both serenity and adventure, both heritage and hope, both protection and participation. Parks are a place for people and a place for people to appreciate the nature that we have.

So I urge all members to support Bill 26, the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025. Thank you very much, Speaker. It's a privilege to speak in front of you today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I recognize the member from Toronto–Danforth.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you very much, Speaker. I appreciate that.

I'd like to start off by saying I agree with the member that parks are important. Urban parks and adventure parks make sense to me in terms of people's well-being and the well-being of any region. So I appreciate having the bill brought forward.

But I have to say that in preparing for this, I talked with my colleague Sandy Shaw, who had been our critic for the environment earlier this year. She pointed out a number of things to me that I will be pointing out this evening.

Let's be clear, this bill gives the government new powers to establish classes of parks whose objective, as has been said, is to improve access to compatible nature-based recreation near or in urban centres or in other areas, and that seems fine as it goes.

But I'll be honest, with this government, the devil's in the details, and those are really, I'm sorry to say, not to be found in this bill.

The bill, on paper, talks about the conception of a new designation of urban park and adventure parks, and that should be fine, could be good. But let's be real. I have no reason and people don't have any reason to trust the Ford government when it comes to environmental matters.

Think about it, Speaker. Think about the greenbelt sell-off. Think of this government exempting a \$15-billion

highway that will pave over precious farmland—that's being exempt from environmental assessment. That makes no sense in terms of environmental protection.

This government has broken the law numerous times by disregarding our Environmental Bill of Rights, and ignoring the law is not a particularly good thing. They're now in a process this year of forcing conservation authorities to conduct an audit to identify surplus lands potentially for sell-off.

We set up conservation authorities to protect nature and, frankly, as in the case of the Toronto region, to protect against flooding. We need those lands. We have a deficit in terms of land under conservation protection, and asking conservation authorities to look at lands that can be taken away makes no sense to me and certainly seems to be in conflict with the bill that's being brought forward this evening.

This is a government that has delisted species at risk such as the redbreasted dace, which, as my colleague said, is a cute little minnow that has the unfortunate fate of being inconveniently located where this government wants to build a highway. How did they deal with that issue? Well, they delisted it rather than protect this endangered species.

This government has an abysmal, dubious record when it comes to our environment. With that in mind, there are five concerning aspects to this bill which I hope the member will address.

First, will these parks fulfill the purposes of the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, the PPCRA? Those purposes are protecting ecosystems, protecting provincially significant elements of Ontario's natural and cultural heritage, maintaining biodiversity and providing opportunities for compatible, ecologically sustainable recreation.

Now, urban centres already exist. We have things like parks, obviously, football fields, playgrounds for kids, even golf courses. But under the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act and the purposes of that, these types of parks should not count as urban parks. Again, this is not addressed anywhere in the bill.

1810

A second serious misgiving is this: I question whether this government has a coherent understanding or actually cares about urban parks and how they should fit into our national parks system. Exhibit A is the Rouge National Urban Park, which is the federal example of an urban park. Actually, so is the Ojibway National Urban Park, which others have referred to.

I'll note—and I'll read some text from this article—that the federal government was obliged to threaten federal action after Parks Canada warned that the Ford government's proposed removal of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve could cause “irreversible harm” to the Rouge National Urban Park.

Quoting from the article: “Parks Canada has issued a stark rebuke to Ontario's plan to open up sections of protected greenbelt land for housing development, saying the move risks ‘irreversible harm’ and that proper consultation on the proposal has not taken place.”

The article goes on to say, “Should these lands be removed from the greenbelt and developed as proposed,

Parks Canada's analysis suggests that there's a probable risk of irreversible harm to wildlife, natural ecosystems and agricultural landscapes within Rouge National Urban Park ... reducing the viability and functionality of the park's ecosystem and farmland.”

Finally, they say, “It is our opinion that, to date, the province has not met the consultation requirement ... as the province has not reached out to discuss these matters with Parks Canada.”

So you have to ask very seriously whether this government understands or cares about how new designations, the new powers that are being asked to designate these parks will fit within a national framework. Again, we're dealing with a government with a dubious track record.

Another concern—and it's a concern shared by many people that have looked at this bill and many people that are concerned with biodiversity, environmentalists, biologists, who say the concern here is that the powers in this bill could be used to downgrade existing classes of lands that are conserved. So this government should make a commitment right here and put in this bill that existing conservation areas and provincial parks will remain as is, that their ecological functions would be reduced if converted to urban parks and you promise that that will not be the case. We need to add, clearly, new parks, not downgrade existing spaces with high ecological function, which is what this government tried to do with the Rouge National Urban Park.

No one will dispute and everyone will agree that urban parks are good for our health and well-being, but they're not sufficient for ecological function. We need to have both conservation areas and urban parks. We can't substitute one for the other. We don't want to downgrade spaces that provide the much-needed biodiversity, species habitat and flood mitigation that exist in already protected areas.

Flood mitigation, Speaker, is an important concept. This is a government that's prepared to pave over wetlands, to not take into consideration the role that wetlands play in protecting us from floods and cleaning our waters. They've shown they have a disregard for that. So I have a concern right here that this government will use these new powers without consideration to how we're protecting Ontarians from the impacts of flooding, which we will see more and more with the advent of more serious climate change impacts.

Again, we need urban parks and adventure areas, and we need conservation areas—not one at the expense of the other. I'd like to hear from the member that that is not going to happen.

A concern, as well, is what lands are we going to use to create these urban parks, these adventure areas? It was suggested to me by my colleague that we should be looking at the hundreds and hundreds of abandoned gravel mines and abandoned oil and gas well areas in the province. These are areas that could be rehabilitated.

You could use an example from Hamilton. I grew up in Hamilton. The rock garden at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton is an extraordinary place. The oldest part of the Royal Botanical Gardens, it was acquired in 1932, and it was the earliest example of how industrial landscapes could be reimagined and repurposed. It was an abandoned

gravel pit. The work began in late 1929 during the stock market crash, which is when the gravel pit was closed. Workers who did this at a time of huge shortage of jobs made a great contribution to the Hamilton area and put food on the table. If you ever go over there, go to the rock garden. It's spectacular. It's a beautiful place. It's a gem.

I urge the member to think about the points that I have raised and that will be raised by others who will speak about this bill and ensure that the issues that are before us are ones that are addressed in a substantial way. Despite misgivings, we will support this bill, but I should say in advance that we will be watching exactly what happens—given your track record, there is every reason for caution and for vigilance to ensure that ecological values are protected.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate? I recognize the member from Leeds–Grenville–Thousand Islands and—

Mr. Steve Clark: Rideau Lakes.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Rideau Lakes.

Mr. Steve Clark: You should know that; you should know Rideau Lakes. Thanks, Speaker.

I first want to begin by commending the member for Windsor–Tecumseh on this private member's bill. He's a great member, and I'm really pleased to be able to stand and support him today.

As we've heard with his opening remarks, Bill 26 amends the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act and it establishes two new classes of provincial park: urban class parks and adventure class parks. I think it's a great opportunity to create new protected park lands for Ontarians of all ages to be able to connect with nature.

Our government believes so strongly in the value of outdoor recreation. We know that an active lifestyle is good for our physical health. Putting down our phones, stepping away from our screens that are so much a part of our daily lives is also tremendously beneficial for our mental health and well-being. I'm a big proponent of what the member for Windsor–Tecumseh is proposing. To have the opportunity to create more protected spaces is, I think, something that we all should support. I certainly fully support it.

In my great riding of Leeds–Grenville–Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, we're really fortunate. We've got numerous outdoor recreational areas where folks can go hiking and paddling, bike riding, cross-country skiing—pretty much anything you can think of is available in the riding. And we get to do it in what I've always maintained is the best natural landscape you're going to find anywhere in Ontario.

But that's not the case everywhere in our province, Speaker. What Bill 26 does is it gives us the tools to establish new protected areas and maintain our rich biodiversity, including in and around urban centres, where access can be limited. The bill also does other things: It also ensures that when we create these new parks, we maintain public access and we allow recreational activities within it. I want to focus on that because I think it's important, because the best way to teach our kids to

respect nature and appreciate the benefits of being active is to get them outside. Get them outside climbing, hiking, biking and exploring.

I've seen the importance of what the member is trying to put forward in this bill in my own riding. The bill touches directly on an issue that I've been working on with the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. We have in my riding an opportunity to significantly expand the Charleston Lake Provincial Park, one of the jewels of our provincial parks system—and folks, if you've never been there, I want to invite you there. I'd love to be able to take you there. It's just truly beautiful.

While I'm supportive of this plan to grow the park, I don't want it to come at the expense of the many recreational activities that have been traditionally taken place on the lands. This includes snowmobiling, ATV riding, mountain biking, hiking, hunting and cross-country skiing. We don't want the lands put under a bubble. We want them to be protected, but we also want them to be accessible areas where people can get out and actively use them, as they've done for generations. That's why I'm so pleased the minister established a working group in my riding to chart a path forward that protects the land while maintaining these recreational uses.

1820

There's a couple of people I want to thank. I want to thank Darin Williamson, president of the Athens and District Snowmobile Club, and Greg Potvin, president of the Thousand Islands ATV Club. They've agreed to sit on this working group. I want to also recognize another individual, Laura Lee Davies, who's been an invaluable support to me throughout this initiative. I'm looking forward to announcing something really, really special soon.

Speaker, I want to thank all the members. Most importantly, I want to thank the member for Windsor–Tecumseh for his excellent work, his excellent research in bringing this bill forward. It's an opportunity, folks, for him to leave a legacy. This bill is an opportunity for him to have that legacy, and I think it's something that all members of the Legislature should aspire to.

Thanks for giving me the chance to speak this afternoon.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Tyler Watt: I'm pleased to rise today to discuss Bill 26, An Act to amend the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, brought forward by my colleague from Windsor–Tecumseh, MPP Andrew Dowie. The government side will appreciate this: I'm actually quite supportive of all this, and I won't be going in as hard as I normally do.

I'll start off by saying I'm supportive of this bill, which proposes to create two new park classifications, adventure class parks and urban class parks, and in doing so, modernize how Ontarians experience and connect with our province's natural heritage.

Ontario is blessed with an extraordinary park system: more than 340 provincial parks and 295 conservation reserves, covering over nine million hectares of land. These spaces protect our biodiversity, our water systems

and the natural beauty that defines Ontario, but they also are where families camp, children learn to fish, hikers reconnect with nature and countless Ontarians find peace of mind. So when we talk about expanding or reshaping that system, it matters deeply not just to environmentalists and policy-makers but to every Ontarian who's ever stood on a trail and felt grateful for the land beneath their feet.

I want to start by recognizing what this bill does well. The concept of an urban class park is long overdue. Many Ontarians, particularly those in fast-growing cities like Ottawa, Mississauga or Brampton, don't have easy access to green spaces that are both natural and accessible. An urban class designation could help municipalities, conservation authorities and the province collaborate to create new green corridors, places where families can picnic, cycle or kayak close to home, without needing to drive for hours.

As the MPP for Nepean, I know how valuable this would be for my riding. Our city is expanding rapidly. Families in Barrhaven, Riverside South and Bells Corners constantly tell me how much they value access to nearby trails and natural spaces like Stony Swamp, Chapman Mills Conservation Area or Rideau River park. These are essential not just for recreation but for community well-being and mental health.

By formally recognizing urban parks, the bill sends a positive message that nature belongs in every neighbourhood, not just in the backcountry. That's a principle I can support wholeheartedly.

The proposed adventure class parks also have merit. Ontario has a passionate community of outdoor enthusiasts, from mountain bikers to snowmobilers to rock climbers, who want more opportunities to enjoy nature responsibly. These activities can bring tourism, local economic benefits and year-round use of our park system. Done right, adventure parks could support rural economies, boost small tourism operators and encourage young people to engage with nature in new ways.

I do have some ideas for how we could improve this bill, which I will share. The strength of Ontario's park system has always rested on a simple principle that ecological integrity comes first. Our parks are not just playgrounds; they are living ecosystems, home to species at risk and delicate habitats that can be destroyed in a single season if we get the balance wrong.

Bill 26 does risk tipping that balance. It introduces high-impact recreational use, like ATVs and snowmobiles, under the new adventure class without clearly defining where, how or under what safeguards those activities will be permitted.

This bill also grants the Lieutenant Governor in Council the power to create additional park classes by regulation without returning to the Legislature. That's a significant shift as it means that future governments could reclassify lands or invent new categories, perhaps one that prioritizes development or tourism over conservation, without any debate in this chamber and without consultation with our Indigenous partners, municipalities or environmental experts.

Speaker, I don't believe that's what Ontarians expect when we talk about stewarding our parks. Accountability does matter and public trust does matter. So if we are going to create new opportunities for recreation, we also need clear guardrails, transparent consultation, strong environmental assessment processes and a continued commitment to the 2006 act's core purpose: to maintain ecological integrity above all else.

Bill 26 would be stronger if it explicitly reaffirmed that conservation remains the top priority across all park classes. I would like to see amendments that require mandatory environmental assessments before new adventure parks are designated; a commitment that no existing wilderness, nature reserve or cultural heritage parks will be downgraded or reclassified; and consultation with Indigenous communities and municipalities before any new park is created by regulation—although we know how consulting with municipalities can take a long time. Because when you give the government the ability to make these changes behind closed doors, you do risk undermining decades of public trust in how we protect Ontario's land and water, which we are so lucky to have.

Speaker, this government's track record on environmental decision-making doesn't inspire confidence in me, so that's why I think that this part is so important. When they introduce legislation like this, the government builds in accountability measures from the start. Expanding access to recreation should never come at the expense of environmental stewardship.

I want to talk about how this community access to green space in Nepean is something that I've heard quite a lot about at the doors and how it will be impacted by this bill. Our community in Nepean is one of the fastest growing in Ontario. New subdivisions rise where farmers' fields once stood. I went to a middle school beside a farm. It was pretty much all rural land when I was a kid, and all that is city-like now. With all of that change and growth comes a need for balance, for ensuring that development doesn't come at the expense of green, public and livable spaces—something I really do miss about when I was a kid.

Parents in Half Moon Bay in my riding and Stonebridge tell me about how much they rely on trails and local parks for their kids to get outside and breathe fresh air. Seniors in Leslie Park and Manordale speak about how walking paths and community gardens contribute to their health and sense of belonging.

We're fortunate to have incredible local conservation partners—the Rideau Valley Conservation Authority, the Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club and local groups like friends of Stony Swamp—all working to protect these spaces and educate the public about how fragile they are.

But we also know that many Nepean residents don't always have the time or resources to travel to provincial parks like Algonquin or Sandbanks. That's why the idea of urban class parks in your bill could be transformative, giving residents the opportunity to experience nature close to home and helping cities like Ottawa secure more land for community use before it disappears to development.

I would urge this government to work closely with municipalities, including the city of Ottawa, to ensure that urban class parks are connected to transit, accessible for all ages and abilities and designed with equity in mind. Whether you live downtown or in the suburbs, everyone deserves clean air, open trails and the chance to connect with nature.

In Nepean, we see what happens when green space planning is done right. Community bonds are stronger, public health improves and young people grow up with a deep respect for their environment. That's the kind of future this bill should help build. In addition, green space does come up at the doors quite frequently in my riding.

Let me return to one of the bill's more positive and hopeful aspects, the urban class parks. We know that access to green space is tied directly with physical and mental health, something near and dear to my heart as a nurse. The pandemic made it clearer than ever that families turned to those local trails, parks and conservation areas as their refuge.

1830

But access isn't equitable. In many lower-income or densely built communities, there simply aren't enough green spaces within walking distance. Urban class parks could be a powerful tool to change that. If implemented with equity in mind, imagine turning underused lands along rivers or hydro corridors into community parks that preserve biodiversity and provide recreation. Imagine working with municipalities to connect trail networks between provincial parks and city bike paths. These are real, achievable opportunities for collaboration between the province and local governments.

I would encourage the government to partner closely with municipalities, school boards—or whatever remains of them—and conservation authorities, and to ensure these urban parks are accessible to people with disabilities, connected to public transit and designed with climate resilience in mind. Let's make sure these new parks are more than just another photo op ribbon cutting. Let's make them examples of what inclusive, sustainable design can look like.

The potential economic benefits of expanding our park system are significant. Ontario Parks already contributes over \$500 million annually to the provincial economy and supports thousands of jobs, from park wardens and maintenance staff to outfitters and guides in nearby towns. Adventure parks could attract new tourism, particularly in northern and rural Ontario, where communities are eager for four-season recreation opportunities. Urban parks could enhance livability and boost local economies through tourism and recreation spending. But again, the key word here is balance. If we get this right, we can grow both the economy and the environment together. If we get it wrong, we'll spend the next decade cleaning up the consequences.

Another area that deserves some attention is how this bill was developed. Stakeholders like the Ontario Trails Council, the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs and many municipal leaders have expressed cautious optimism. But they also want to see proper consultation. Too

often we've seen this government legislate first and consult later. That approach might be efficient but rarely produces good policy. If we're expanding the very framework that defines our provincial park system, the first major change in nearly two decades, then we owe it to Ontarians to do it right.

Speaker, Ontario's parks are part of who we are. They are landscapes we fall in love with as children, the trails where we clear our minds and the spaces that remind us of our shared responsibility to the planet. This bill offers genuine opportunity to modernize how we experience these spaces, to make nature more accessible. It's a good idea, and I support this bill, and I hope that you'll take some of my suggestions into account. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Monica Ciriello: It is a pleasure to rise today in the House to speak on a bill that is not only deeply personal to me but to my community of Hamilton Mountain. I am pleased to support what has been put forward by my colleague from Windsor–Tecumseh. It is an incredible bill that will be able to leave a legacy which he has started.

Nature is a part of who we are as Ontarians. From the pristine lakes and the dense forest of the north to the winding trails and the rugged escarpment that you find here in Hamilton, the great outdoors is a part of our daily lives. For generations, parks have been places where families create memories, where children develop a love for the outdoors and skills that last them a lifetime, and where all of us go to find peace and renewal.

As the MPP for Hamilton Mountain, I know just how deeply Hamiltonians value their green spaces. Hamilton is proudly known as the waterfall capital of the world, a title that reflects our deep connection to nature. With over 100 waterfalls throughout our city in places like Sherman Falls, Albion, Webster Falls and Tiffany Falls, just to name a few, people travel from all over the province to come and see what we have to offer in Hamilton.

We also have the Bruce Trail winding along our great escarpment and Cootes Paradise and the Dundas Conservation Authority, all of which protect our most treasured natural areas in our community. Our region is also home to the Royal Botanical Gardens, one of Canada's largest and most renowned botanical institutions, underscoring the importance we place on preserving biodiversity and access to green space.

For me, personally, nature is a source of joy. Being outside, stepping away from our screens and our phones, walking and hiking, kayaking, spending time with your dog or with loved ones offers us a chance to unplug and recharge. But we know for many Ontarians, especially those living in urban centres, that connection to nature can feel out of reach. Our province is growing more urban, more diverse and more connected. As it changes, so must we. So I applaud the member opposite—not opposite, but opposite of where I am right now—for bringing this forward.

I rise today in support of Bill 26, a private member's bill introduced to modernize Ontario's park system to

meet the needs of today and tomorrow. It's not just about protecting green spaces, but making sure that all Ontarians across our province, no matter where they live, can enjoy the beauty and benefits of nature.

One of the aspects of Bill 26 is the introduction of the urban class parks. These parks bring nature closer to where people live and where they work, transforming vacant lots, riverbanks and underused urban spaces into accessible green getaways. This is about weaving green space directly into the fabric of our own communities, offering places to walk your dog before work, study in the sun between classes or take your kids to play on a Saturday afternoon, all without leaving your community.

In Hamilton, we're very lucky. I mentioned a couple of the great spaces that we have in our city. Arguably, I think we have the best trails, the best parks, the best waterfalls in the province. If you haven't visited, I highly encourage you to come to the city to explore. We know that we have this rich tradition of embracing nature, but we also know we need to do more for the other communities to improve access to parks in urban settings throughout our province.

Bill 26 offers a pathway to enhance and expand our green spaces, ensuring that parks are truly within reach to all residents regardless of where you live. This bill is about equity, health and sustainability, values that resonate deeply with the people that I represent in Hamilton Mountain.

Supporting Bill 26 is a commitment to creating healthier, greener and more inclusive communities across our province. Access to nature improves mental and physical well-being, reduces stress and fosters stronger social connections. Especially in urban centres, parks are not luxuries; they are necessities.

By supporting Bill 26, we're taking an important step toward a future where every Ontarian can find peace and renewal in nature, whether it's along a waterfall trail in Hamilton or a quiet moment in an urban park downtown.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's an honour to rise to speak on Bill 26. I want to say how much I appreciate the member for Windsor–Tecumseh for bringing this bill forward and wanting to expand our park system, especially urban parks, which makes sense as we need more protected lands and access to nature in urban areas.

There is so much emerging research documenting the physical and mental health benefits of spending time in nature. During the pandemic, all of us came to especially appreciate the importance of nature when it comes to our mental health and physical well-being.

As a matter of fact, Speaker, it is so clear that the public wants an expansion of accessible parkland in this province. As somebody who spends a lot of time in our provincial parks, it feels like *The Hunger Games* every time I go to reserve a campsite, whether it's backcountry, car camping etc. So it is clear we need more provincial park space in the province of Ontario.

I also think, given some of the threats to outdoor education we're seeing due to reduced funding in our school systems, that having more urban parks that are

accessible for outdoor education is critically important and an important consideration in this bill.

I'm also excited, in my own riding of Guelph, about the possibility of creating an urban park on the former Ontario Reformatory lands in Guelph. If we can navigate our way through possible shared or conflicting public uses for this land, it's a great opportunity to look at a way to expand urban parks within my own riding. I think as we look across the province, this is so important, because only 12% of Ontario's land is currently protected, and we need more protected areas for recreation, health and ecological reasons. It's especially important in urban areas, as we experience the increasing risks and costs associated with unsafe weather fuelled by the climate crisis. And as temperatures rise, posing serious health risks due to extreme heat, green spaces and urban parks provide will be vital to personal and public health.

1840

So I'm happy to work across party lines with all members of this House, including the member from Windsor–Tecumseh, to create opportunities for the expansion of parks across Ontario. In that spirit of cross-party co-operation, I hope the member will take into consideration concerns that I have and that others have expressed about possible erosion of ecological integrity and democratic decision-making in some parts of Bill 26.

I have concerns about the part of the bill that creates a new class of adventure class parks, not because I'm opposed to the proposed activities—as a matter of fact, I enjoy many of those activities and want to see additional opportunities for people to enjoy those activities in nature, but we also need to make sure that those activities don't come into conflict with sensitive ecosystems and the role that provincial parks play in those ecosystems. Having provisions in the bill that ensure that and give us the confidence that ecological integrity will be maintained is, I believe, critically important.

I also have concerns about the powers that Bill 26 would give cabinet to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specifying objectives for such parks. The reason I have that concern is because over the summer we saw the government take action to remove lands from Wasaga Beach Provincial Park, the largest freshwater and the most visited provincial park in the province of Ontario. The proposal to transfer 148 acres from Ontario's most visited park creates challenges around protecting the sensitive ecosystem of the sand dunes and the habitat for the piping plover. We want to make sure that that kind of ecological integrity is maintained in the provision of the new classification and expansion of parks.

I just want to say to the member opposite, once again, thank you for bringing this bill forward. I hope as the bill progresses through the legislative process that we have an opportunity to ensure that we maintain the ecological integrity of the iconic provincial parks we have in the province of Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

M^{me} France G  linas: Like everybody else, we recognize the importance of having parks and how they help keep people healthy.

I come from northern Ontario. I have 17 provincial parks in my riding. And I can tell you that when the McGuinty government was there, they tried the option 9, “such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations.” What was the new class of parks? It was a non-operating class that they tried to put in Ivanhoe park in my riding. What did that new class of parks mean? It meant that they were not going to maintain the toilets anymore, the parking, the hiking trails, the first aid station, the picnic areas, checking that the potable water tap was still drinkable, as well as not pick up the garbage anymore. So, yes, we still had a park, but it was a non-operating class, a new class of park.

I have nothing wrong with more urban parks—everybody needs—but not at the expense of a new class of parks for northern Ontario where we will lose access to our parks.

I can tell you that in the summer, Ivanhoe is packed. They have 108 campgrounds. All of them are busy. We were able to keep Ivanhoe open. Why? At the time, Gilles Bisson was the member for Timmins–James Bay. He managed to have the city of Timmins pay to keep the park open. This was a provincial park, a provincial responsibility, but there was a new class of park that meant the province did not have to pay for garbage pickup or anything else. If section 1 number 9, the new class of park, means this will be done to the parks in the north, expect people to not be happy. We’re happy with urban parks. We wish for all the big urban areas down south to have a park but not at the expense of the existing provincial parks that people in the north rely on and that we work so hard to keep open.

Again, thanks to my friend Gilles Bisson, who helped me on that one.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: I’m pleased to rise again and speak in support of the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025, by my esteemed colleague.

Having spoken during the first reading, I continue to see the value this legislation has for Ontarians, both in my riding of Lambton–Kent–Middlesex and all across the province of Ontario. This amendment strengthens Ontario Parks systems by making sure we can offer many different recreational opportunities while maintaining the integrity of our natural spaces. It provides the flexibility for the government to respond to the evolving needs of communities, whether that’s offering more accessible nature experiences near urban centres or promoting adventurous outdoor activities in our rural and northern landscapes.

In my riding, we are lucky to have a great number of natural areas, from forests and trails to rivers and lakes. Residents value these spaces, not only for recreation but for the benefits they bring to physical and mental wellness, community engagement and local tourism.

This legislation recognizes that Ontarians’ relationship with nature is changing, and it ensures that the parks system can adapt to meet those needs.

I also want to note the potential economic impact. Parks that cater to different recreational interests can draw visitors to local communities, supporting small businesses, outdoor outfitters and tourism operators while creating a sense of pride and connection with the land.

Speaker, the creation of these park classes is a forward-looking step. It balances environmental duties with active use and accessibility. The people of Ontario deserve a park system that is inclusive, diverse and responsive to recreational needs, and its amendment helps achieve that vision.

For these reasons, I am proud to support the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025, and I look forward to seeing its positive impact across the province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): The member has two minutes to respond.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to thank the members from Toronto–Danforth, Leeds–Grenville–Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, Lambton–Kent–Middlesex, Hamilton Mountain, Nepean, Guelph and Nickel Belt. I really appreciate your contributions to the debate on Bill 26.

I certainly want to make it clear that the goal here is addition, not subtraction. I certainly know full well—back home, there were two parks close to me, Peche Island and Holly Beach, that were deregulated in 1989 and 1986, respectively. I know what it’s like to lose parkland in your area, and this is absolutely a different direction. We want to expand outdoor opportunities for young people, for seniors, for everyone, so that we can bring access to nature and have outdoor recreation.

Truly, truly, truly, this is about building a more inclusive parks system, more equitable access, more access as a whole to the natural environment. It’s important that young people, especially, learn about biodiversity and have the opportunity to enjoy the wonders of nature. Outdoor recreation is the best possible way to really learn that.

Recreation looks different today than it did before. Pok  mon Go was instrumental at getting people out onto the street and checking out their neighbourhoods. Having more lands available—geocaching is another piece, treetop trekking. We don’t want those types of environments that are fun—ziplining. These are fun places. Imagine a developer comes along and says, “I can offer you a boatload of money for that land.” Now that insulation is no longer there.

There is room for protected public spaces. There always has been under the Ontario government, since 1893, and this is about adding protected spaces, protecting recreation and access for the people of Ontario to the recreation that they desire.

I look forward to moving to committee to discuss the bill and hear from further submissions.

Certainly, once again, I want to thank all the speakers for your contributions; I think it’s the most speakers I’ve had on one of my private member’s bills or motions, so I really appreciate that. Thanks so much.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): The time provided for private members' public business has expired.

Mr. Dowie has moved second reading of Bill 26, An Act to amend the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006.

Is it the pleasure of the House that this motion carry? The motion is carried.

Second reading agreed to.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Pursuant to standing order 100(h), the bill is referred to the Committee of the Whole House.

The member from Windsor–Tecumseh.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Speaker, I'd like to see the bill referred to the Standing Committee on the Interior.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Is the majority in favour of the bill being referred to the Standing Committee on the Interior? Agreed. The bill is referred to the Standing Committee on the Interior.

All matters relating to private members' public business having been completed, this House stands adjourned until Wednesday, October 21, 2025, at 9 a.m.

The House adjourned at 1851.

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Glover, Chris (NDP)	Spadina—Fort York	
Gretzky, Lisa (NDP)	Windsor West / Windsor-Ouest	
Grewal, Hardeep Singh (PC)	Brampton East / Brampton-Est	
Gualtieri, Silvia (PC)	Mississauga East—Cooksville / Mississauga-Est—Cooksville	
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Lumsden, Hon. / L'hon. Neil (PC)	Hamilton East—Stoney Creek / Hamilton-Est—Stoney Creek	Minister of Sport / Ministre du Sport
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Sabawy, Sheref (PC)	Mississauga—Erin Mills	
Sandhu, Amarjot (PC)	Brampton West / Brampton-Ouest	
Sarkaria, Hon. / L'hon. Prabmeet Singh (PC)	Brampton South / Brampton-Sud	Minister of Transportation / Ministre des Transports
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Sattler, Peggy (NDP)	London West / London-Ouest	
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Schreiner, Mike (GRN)	Guelph	
Scott, Chris (IND)	Sault Ste. Marie	
Scott, Laurie (PC)	Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock	
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Tibollo, Hon. / L'hon. Michael A. (PC)	Vaughan—Woodbridge	Associate Attorney General / Procureur général associé
Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC)	Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington	Deputy Speaker / Vice-Présidente Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Présidente du Comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative
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Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle
Vaugeois, Lise (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
Vickers, Paul (PC)	Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound	
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	
Watt, Tyler (LIB)	Nepean	
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Williams, Hon. / L'hon. Charmaine A. (PC)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity / Ministre associée des Perspectives sociales et économiques pour les femmes
Wong-Tam, Kristyn (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	