

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

IN-12

Journal des débats (Hansard)

IN-12

Standing Committee on the Interior

Provincial Parks
and Conservation Reserves
Amendment Act, 2025

1st Session
44th Parliament

Monday 17 November 2025

Comité permanent des affaires intérieures

Loi de 2025 modifiant la Loi
sur les parcs provinciaux
et les réserves de conservation

1^{re} session
44^e législature

Lundi 17 novembre 2025

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffier : Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Hansard on the Internet

Hansard and other documents of the Legislative Assembly can be on your personal computer within hours after each sitting. The address is:

Le Journal des débats sur Internet

L'adresse pour faire paraître sur votre ordinateur personnel le Journal et d'autres documents de l'Assemblée législative en quelques heures seulement après la séance est :

<https://www.ola.org/>

Index inquiries

Reference to a cumulative index of previous issues may be obtained by calling the Hansard Reporting Service indexing staff at 416-325-7400.

Renseignements sur l'index

Adressez vos questions portant sur des numéros précédents du Journal des débats au personnel de l'index, qui vous fourniront des références aux pages dans l'index cumulatif, en composant le 416-325-7400.

Hansard Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Journal des débats et services linguistiques
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 2816-7279

CONTENTS

Monday 17 November 2025

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.....	IN-425
Mr. Andrew Dowie	
Ontario Nature; Grand(m)others Act to Save the Planet; Ms. Megan Emanuele.....	IN-433
Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge	
Ms. Kathy Geczi	
Ms. Nina Deeb; Ontario Federation of Trail Riders; Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance; Wilderness Committee	IN-442
Ms. Lisa Thompson	
Ms. Katie Krellove	
Ms. Carolyn Richards	
Association of Consulting Engineering Companies–Ontario; Ontario Conservation Accelerator; Township of Uxbridge	IN-450
Ms. Laura Lambie	
Mr. Mike Hendren	
Mr. Dave Barton	
The Friends of Ojibway Prairie; City of Windsor	IN-457
Mr. Mike Fisher	
Mr. Drew Dilkens	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE
ON THE INTERIORCOMITÉ PERMANENT
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Monday 17 November 2025

Lundi 17 novembre 2025

*The committee met at 0901 in committee room 1.*PROVINCIAL PARKS
AND CONSERVATION RESERVES
AMENDMENT ACT, 2025
LOI DE 2025 MODIFIANT LA LOI
SUR LES PARCS PROVINCIAUX
ET LES RÉSERVES DE CONSERVATION

Consideration 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 Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The members of the Standing Committee on the Interior will now come to order. We are here today for public hearings on Bill 26, An Act to amend the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006.

Are there any questions before we begin the hearing? If not, I will ask the member from Windsor–Tecumseh, MPP Dowie, to make his opening statement.

MPP Dowie, the floor is yours.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the members of the committee for the opportunity to speak on Bill 26, Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025.

I want to begin by acknowledging the thoughtful dialogue that has shaped this bill. As you know, I presented the bill initially last year, and this is the second iteration. During that time, I received significant feedback on the content from stakeholders of all stripes.

I know that across all parties and all regions, there's a shared understanding of something important: that Ontario's natural spaces matter deeply to the people who live here because they shape our identity. They connect our families and neighbours. They ground our communities in something larger than ourselves. That's truly why Bill 26 deserves serious consideration by the committee today.

For decades, Ontario has built a provincial parks system that is admired across the country, but we also know that our population has grown, our cities have expanded and the ways Ontarians experience nature have changed. I had the privilege of visiting a couple close to the GTA in recent years, Forks of the Credit and Mono Cliffs. I noticed the introduction of the traffic arms to keep parking managed

well. It shows how much the parks are loved, but also that there's a need for increased management.

Bill 26 is about updating a strong foundation, not replacing it. It's about recognizing the needs of a modern province while holding firmly to our conservation values. This bill accomplishes something that I feel is truly important: It helps ensure that access to nature is not to be determined by a person's postal code or income but by a shared belief that nature should be reachable, welcoming and meaningful—in effect, democratic.

In my own community of Windsor–Tecumseh, this need is very real. When I was growing up, public access to Lake St. Clair's shoreline was quite limited. I've always lived in the town of Tecumseh. As I grew up, we were blessed with a lakefront, and no public spaces, save and except for some pumping stations for stormwater, were available for us to enjoy, because every piece of waterfront had been shaped by private development, agriculture, industry. Families who lived just minutes away from the lake rarely had a place to enjoy it.

This isn't about assigning the blame of the past. We grew up fast as a country and as a province. It's simply the history of how the region grew. But it meant that generations who did not have the same everyday contact with nature that others across Ontario enjoyed was a real thing.

Today, we have an opportunity to do better for the next generation. Ontario recognized this challenge more than 50 years ago when it explored creating near urban parks. Bronte Creek Provincial Park came from that effort. It was in the early 1970s that both the Legislature and the park staff looked deeply into this concept.

Other properties, including Peche Island in my riding, were acquired by the province with the same vision in mind, but the momentum ended up fading. The idea remains sound; the tools to implement near urban parks were limited and a casualty of that was Peche Island provincial park in my riding, which is no longer a provincial park. It did not fit the park system as envisioned at the time, even though it is relied upon as a source of refuge and of solace for so many in our community, and happily the city of Windsor has taken it on.

Bill 26 updates those tools, lets Ontario complete a vision that many people—planners, conservationists, community members—saw as possible but could not bring fully to life. One of the most meaningful elements of this bill is the creation of the urban class park. Urban parks make nature accessible where Ontarians now live: in

growing towns, expanding cities and suburban communities. They offer walking trails, forested areas, wetlands, cultural sites and outdoor education spaces that are truly close enough to visit on a weekday evening or Saturday morning—in many cases, as envisioned particularly for the proposed Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park, within walking distance of your home. They support seniors, newcomers, young families and students who might otherwise struggle to reach distant parks.

The closest provincial park to my residence is in the town of Wheatley, part of the municipality of Chatham-Kent. It's about an hour's drive from me. We have the Ojibway Prairie provincial nature reserve, which is close and is of tremendous ecological value. It shall not be developed and it's not meant to be enjoyed intensively, but it is a vital part of our community.

What we're seeing in Uxbridge demonstrates what is possible: over 500 hectares of protected green space beside a community that has grown significantly. Mayor Dave Barton captured the spirit of the idea well when he said that urban parks should be vibrant, welcoming and accessible. That's exactly what this bill helps to create, because urban parks complement—they don't replace our traditional provincial parks; they simply acknowledge that in a province of 15 million people, proximity matters.

Bill 26 also introduces adventure class parks, recognizing that outdoor recreation continues to evolve. One thing that I think of all the time is how popular pickleball is. I'm not saying necessarily that we're looking to deploy this across our park system, but boy, when I was elected to town council back in 2014, I would never ever have heard of pickleball, and now we have at least 12 courts just in my own neighbourhood. This was over the span of only a couple of years.

Many Ontarians experience nature through cycling, paddling, climbing or back-country activities. These activities bring people into the landscape in different ways, ways that build both appreciation and stewardship. Adventure parks can support local tourism, encourage year-round activities, give communities new ways to connect people with natural spaces and truly build that appreciation for our biodiversity and for ecological protection.

Stakeholders from across the province have expressed support for this forward-looking approach. They see, as I certainly do, that Ontario recreation and outdoor recreation is not a distraction from conservation; it is often what inspires people to protect the places that they value most. Certainly my community offers a clear example of what accessible natural spaces can mean. I mentioned the proposed Ojibway National Urban Park; it will unite over 900 hectares of remarkable habitat and includes the rare tallgrass prairie ecosystem at Ontario's Ojibway Prairie provincial nature reserve, one of the last of its kind in Canada.

And local residents truly know how special this area is. I can tell you, I've walked those trails, summer and winter—I actually recommend winter because it's a bit less muddy than the spring and fall—but, boy, it is a place that people of all backgrounds come to enjoy.

0910

I've seen students. I've seen seniors. I've seen families. I've seen people doing meditation. I've seen someone who just went out there to open up a book and had a little bit of music going on. They felt at peace in the nature reserve. I've seen newcomers experiencing Canadian wildlife for the first time. This is the part of North America that is, I'd say, unparalleled. We have democratic access to these places. They're not under private ownership. They are available to the public at large, and not all places in the world get to experience those opportunities.

I've spoken with volunteers who dedicate countless hours to maintaining the health of the ecosystem. This park has momentum because people believe in it. All levels of government, municipal leaders, Indigenous partners, environmental experts and certainly the federal and provincial governments—and Bill 26 was, in part, inspired by this work that's happening and provides a framework that Ontario needs to collaborate effectively on projects like this.

Another strength of this legislation is the way that it encourages partnerships. Municipalities, conservation groups, Indigenous communities and local volunteers already work together on trail systems. I think of the Bruce Trail, which is largely privately owned, and yet we rely on it. It's a terrific, terrific place to go to, and I would encourage all Ontarians to experience the beauty of the Niagara Escarpment all the way from Tobermory down to Queenston.

We are working together on educational programming and habitat restoration. I do want to give a shout-out to my great friends at Detroit River Canadian Cleanup who I've joined for multiple garbage pickups. It's amazing what we find out there, but it shows the investment that we have as a people, as a community, in making sure our natural environments are protected. Bill 26 makes those partnerships much easier by aligning the park categories with how communities are already using and caring for these spaces.

We know that outdoor recreation also supports local economies. I'll put my hand up as being a shining example. I will seek out a provincial park. We have the parks scratch map that you can get from MapArt. It's really an ambitious plan where if you visit a provincial park, you scratch off your visit. There's also the Ontario Parks passport. People, families particularly, look for provincial parks to go visit. It is a destination.

For those communities that are out there that could use a boost for tourism, this is a tremendous, tremendous way to bring people in and see all that your community has to offer. Whether it's visitors exploring Uxbridge, families visiting Bronte Creek or cyclists using the many trails that we have near Windsor, green spaces bring people into local shops, cafes and small businesses.

This is a practical benefit, one that complements the environmental goals of the bill. One aspect of the bill that deserves recognition is its flexibility. By allowing the creation of new park classes through regulation, Ontario can respond more efficiently as our needs change, whether it's because of our environmental pressures, our new recreation patterns or community-led proposals, and this

approach keeps the legislation adaptable while preserving the oversight and accountability that Ontarians expect.

We also have a responsibility to the next generation. Today's youth spend a lot more time indoors, often on electronic devices—and I'm among them. I remember the days when I didn't have a smart phone, and I think my posture was quite a bit better in those days. Many do not have access to natural spaces, and it was only a couple of years ago—I think it was just five, six years ago, the Pokémon Go phenomenon saw all kinds of young people out enjoying the outdoors. While that didn't quite last as an initiative, it showed that when mastered well, we can introduce or reintroduce youth to our natural spaces and promote that stewardship.

We know that time in nature supports physical activities, mental well-being and environmental awareness, and truly urban and adventure class parks give young Ontarians many more touch points, more chances to learn, to explore and feel connected to the natural world, and if we want future leaders to care about conservation, we must ensure that they have real opportunities to experience it.

Chair, I'll close by saying this: Bill 26 is my effort to be thoughtful, flexible and forward-looking. It builds on a strong legacy while recognizing the needs of a changing province. It enhances access to nature. It strengthens partnerships. It supports conservation and responsible recreation through sound management and helps ensure that the benefits of Ontario's natural heritage are shared more equitably.

Again, this is democracy in action. That access is for all of us. And the bill says in a clear and constructive way that nature should be part of everyday life—not an occasional privilege, not one controlled by private landowners all the time, but truly a regular experience.

I encourage the committee to support this legislation and allow it to move forward for the benefit of all communities across Ontario.

I look to Mayor Barton—I know he's joining us later—and what a phenomenal investment that that municipality is making together with the province and all partners in the Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park.

So with that, thank you, Chair. Thanks to the committee members for your time. I'm certainly happy to receive your questions of me.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, MPP Dowie.

Now we will start two rounds of questioning. The questions will be six and a half minutes for each party—two rounds—and we will start with the official opposition. MPP Shaw, you have six and a half minutes.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Good morning. Good Monday to everyone. Thank you, MPP Dowie.

You started by saying natural spaces matter deeply to Ontarians. I couldn't agree more. I'm a provincial park nerd; I do have that little passport and I covet those stickers, and I have extras on my vehicle.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Oh, excellent.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: So I've been to very many of the provincial parks. I love them deeply and feel very protect-

ive of the provincial parks. And with all due respect, I think this is an important bill, but this is a government that has an abysmal track record when it comes to natural spaces and the environment.

I can't help but go over the hit list of things that this government has done and is currently doing. We can start by gutting the conservation authorities' ability to protect wetlands and natural spaces. This is a government that's asking conservation authorities to audit surplus land for the potential of development. So this is the context in which you're presenting this bill.

No one's going to forget the greenbelt scandal: 850 acres of farmland, wetland was attempted to be sold off.

Very recently, your government exempted any environmental assessment for Ontario Place, and even though that wasn't a provincial park, it was a very natural space, and now we have this devastation of coyotes running feral in Liberty Village because their habitat was completely bulldozed.

We also have the spectre of Bill 5, which continues to gut environmental protections or for endangered species in this province, including, I would say, many endangered species that exist in provincial parks.

So you will understand why the people of Ontario don't have a lot of faith in the government doing the right thing when it comes to our provincial parks. You would understand why people are cynical to think that anything that the government sees when it comes to our land—land that belongs collectively to the people of Ontario—is seen as a potential for development for the Premier's friends. And we've seen evidence of that. It's a matter of public record that that's what this government has been up to and continues to be up to.

So, having said all that, this government hasn't earned the trust of Ontarians and, frankly, hasn't earned the trust of the official opposition when it comes to giving yourself unprescribed additional powers.

My question to you is, in the bill, you've added, certainly, the two classes that you've talked about, but you just have "such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations." And this government takes everything behind closed doors, makes significant changes at regulation, and that does not give the people of Ontario an opportunity to weigh in. You will know that it's fairly rare for people to be able to come here to committee or to estimates to have their say.

Can you give me an example—you must have talked about this with staff and with your other colleagues—of what you were considering, what class of park you were considering when you decided to put this class into your bill?

0920

Mr. Andrew Dowie: You're speaking of the urban class?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'm speaking to "such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations."

Mr. Andrew Dowie: At this time, there are no defined classifications beyond the ones that are mentioned in the bill.

However, I will point to my remarks where, in the 1970s, the near urban class had been proposed by the provincial government and ultimately did not get implemented. Now it's 50 years later and we still don't have an urban class park, even though there had been a strategy in which to develop that classification. Should we be waiting 50 years for legislation when we could manage the system in a more nimble manner? I would say we do not need to wait when we have an identified new initiative.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I appreciate that answer but maybe you didn't understand the section I'm referring to, which is section 7 where you're proposing adventure class parks; 8 is urban class parks; and "9. Such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations."

So there must have been a reason that this placeholder is there. There must have been thinking—you must have had dialogue and discussions certainly with the bureaucratic staff, with the ministers involved. What were you thinking? Why did you think that you needed to have unrestricted power to put in a very vague class that would only be prescribed by regulations?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Chair, through you to member Shaw: The urban class parks are the perfect example. Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park does not have an urban classification today. Yet it was established as an urban concept park. The national—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you, MPP. You're not answering the question, really.

My question to you would be—I'll get back to this with my follow-up—is Wasaga Beach. For example, this government is planning to sell off I think it's 650 acres of Wasaga Beach, which is a provincial park.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: In order to do that, they may need to change the classification of that park. My question to you is, is this vague "other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations" your government's covert attempt to make changes to Wasaga Beach park and sell off all of those provincial park beachfront lands that people have enjoyed for generations?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair, Wasaga Beach Provincial Park is part of a concept that the municipality brought forward that they entitled Destination Wasaga. They're looking to rebuild their local economy—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Develop.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: —by attracting tourists to the beach once again and they had asked the province to contribute the lands to allow the municipal stewardship for the betterment and enjoyment of the people who visit Wasaga Beach. They felt that the maintenance and the upkeep could be better—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Dowie. The time is up.

We move to the third party: MPP Tsao.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: I think the benefit of this bill is that we're always in favour of more park space. I think that's great to see, so I'm happy to see a bill coming forward to bring more space to protect the environment and for people to enjoy in Ontario.

In fact, as we discussed earlier, I had a hand when I was working as staff in the government helping to create the Rouge National Urban Park. But also, I saw first-hand the challenges that are involved with getting all three levels of government, stakeholders, on side to create such a park. But I also saw how great it can be when it's accomplished and how much the community enjoyed it.

For the urban parks, you touched on this earlier. I really like what you said: "Access to nature should not be determined by dollar amount or postal code, how much you make or where you live." Newcomers, I think, often will immigrate and live in more urban settings, so having access to an urban park is a huge benefit for new Canadians and people in urban settings to enjoy.

With that idea, I'm wondering in terms of accessibility, have you considered, in this bill, ensuring that urban parks, when they're created, there's a consideration for accessibility in terms of transit, accessibility in terms of design for people with varying abilities and to ensure that the local communities actually can get there and enjoy these spaces?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you, member Tsao, for your very excellent question.

I would say, this is something that will come into the management plans of the parks as they're developed. I have read through many over the years as a parks enthusiast, and ultimately—this is not new—to make sure that we have access to the facilities. We don't want to create parks that no one goes to, unless it's for the preservation of the natural environment.

Truly, parks are a place for people, and in all planning measures, we need to look at how people can access the parks—for the urban parks, particularly; their being in urban areas gives that opportunity to ensure that transit is available. I know in the case of Ojibway, which I'm most familiar with, absolutely, it's within the city limits. There's no doubt that it's possible to bring the service to it, and many parts of the Rouge National Urban Park as well to have access to transit.

Uxbridge, I need to educate myself more on the state of their transit system, but it is a fairly easy walk from the urban area. Having gone on the trails in Uxbridge, they are hard surface, so they do provide that accessibility for those that have mobility devices or scooters or wheelchairs. It makes for a very easy and naturalized environment to be able to enjoy. I hope this is the answer to your question.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Great. When trying to decide on this bill, the criteria of what will be classified under these designations—accessibility, as we discussed it, is one thing that needs to be considered. But also, I remember looking back, when we were looking at the Rouge National Urban Park, that when you have to navigate between three different levels of government and stakeholders, the question of which pieces of land, when you really get down to the nitty-gritty of the actual square footage—what pieces of land will be included? What will not be included? I remember there were concerns about the designation of the land, the size and the narrowness of crossings for wildlife. If we cut this off, what does this mean for the deer

population, for the other animals that need to actually access and get through the park?

When we're considering this, there's going to be a lot of, perhaps, different perspectives. At one point, politics will become involved: What parcels of land are and are not part? So how does this bill ensure that when the government is assigning which land qualifies as part of an urban national park or urban park designation, we can make sure to keep politics out of it and that we're really focused on ecological sensitivities and making a park that's accessible for all Ontarians?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you so much for that question.

I want to stress that ecology will always remain part of the provincial parks system, but there's also a role for outdoor recreation and recreation in the natural environment. I would say that this bill opens the door to natural environments that have been modified over the years that may not necessarily have that standing of having rare species or a highlighting example of our ecosystem that just has a standout feature but rather provides maybe more of an introductory path to the natural environment. I would say that not all urban parks may have the most expansive features and that all may necessarily need additional protections beyond the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act as a whole.

As I say, I don't necessarily envision that the urban class will go above and beyond what may actually be there, already in place, because it is introducing and bringing people into the natural environment to really give them the recreational opportunities when it's possible under that classification.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: So then what type of consultation is built into the bill when creating these designations of a new urban park to make sure that the land that's been chosen is actually one that will be the most successful and the most relevant to local communities, rather than perhaps just a handy political announcement?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: The Environmental Registry of Ontario is the mechanism to provide comment, as has been made in the last number of months on a couple of provincial parks and proposed changes to them.

0930

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

Now we move to the government side. MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, PA Dowie, for bringing this forward here, this private member's bill. I, like many other MPPs, have a provincial park in my riding and really do believe that we need to catch up with the times.

Through you, Chair, why do you think the new park classifications are needed?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you very much, MPP Pinsonneault, for that question. Really, they fill gaps in the system. I have had the benefit of travelling throughout North America, particularly, and seeing that different jurisdictions have different visions for their park system.

The United States is one example where they are not limiting their park system to simply biodiversity. Rather, they are protecting rivers, for example, for whitewater rafting; they're protecting strands of forest for treetop trekking and zip-lining and things like that because absent the government creating that land reserve, those lands would be destined for development that would not be accessible to the public.

Ontario has been a lot more focused over the years as to what parks would be part of its system. This bill really does open the door to considering that we have a role to play in developing one's awareness of the outdoors close to home and protecting and preserving outdoor recreation opportunities that may exist.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you for that. You've done a lot of research on this, and I appreciate that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Gallagher Murphy

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, Chair, and through you to MPP Dowie, thank you very much for bringing this private member's bill forward.

I like what you were saying about why this matters, because when you think about this province of 15 million people, and growing, and the majority of these people being in urban areas like myself, in my riding of Newmarket–Aurora, we do not have a provincial park whatsoever. We do have some trails, which are great, and I try to get to those every weekend and when I can during the week to be able to have a walk in nature. Obviously, having them close by—and I hear you when you say that the one closest to you is about an hour's drive. I think about that, and I'm wondering if you could answer this: What parks do you think could be designated as an urban class park?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you, through you, Chair, to MPP Gallagher Murphy. Obviously, the Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park would probably be the number one that would fall under the urban class. I would highlight Bronte Creek as a possibility, given it was given consideration for a near-urban designation when it was created. I think as we grow our network and find places worth protecting closer to our urban environment, those would be destined for this classification.

I do not see a wholesale transition of classifications of our existing parks. There are destined to be one-off cases where these classifications will better suit the park than the ones that they have today. But I'd say those two would be the top ones that would be suitable for the urban classification.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: That's great. I know that Uxbridge—that's probably at least a 45-minute drive or less from my riding, so I think that's wonderful because I know my community would greatly appreciate access to it. Thank you very much. Thank you again for bringing this bill forward.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: Thank you, Chair. I, too, want to agree: Parks are very important, I think, for everybody, all across Ontario, and you bringing this bill forward helps to

revamp the bill and make it better. Why do you think this bill is needed now?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you, MPP Vickers. I actually think to your area, where you have so, so many private landowners who are allowing public access to the Bruce Trail because they are willing hosts and they want to ensure that we have democratic access to our natural environment. But the Bruce Trail publishes a guidebook every couple of years because the map has to change. As land sales happen, sometimes the access to those lands disappears. That's why it is vital that we certainly look to do what we can to ensure that access to our natural environments is democratized as much as possible and coming under public ownership or at least ownership that is in collaboration with a managed provincial park system.

I think of just any number of initiatives. Short Hills is one that comes to mind, and it's in the Niagara Escarpment as well. It is pretty darn close to where people live. It's close to a lot of wineries. I know it's beloved by the people in that part of our province, but they like it the way that it is too, that it is quiet. It is not developed as much as other parks, but it is a place to go to, a place you can walk to. Without Short Hills having been protected back in the 1970s, the region would have been poorer for it. So I hope this has answered your question.

MPP Paul Vickers: Thank you, and I agree. The Bruce Trail has gone through areas where it's not a trail; it's more or less roads now. That's why, hopefully, with thinking like this, we are able to improve our parks and our urban green areas.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Vickers. The time is up. That concludes our first round of questioning.

We will start the second round, and we will go back to the MPP Shaw again from the official opposition.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I want go back to the question that, really, you were not addressing, which is, why do you have a vague clause saying "such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations"? Because you will know that a concern shared by many people who have looked at this bill is that this again gives this government unilateral power and that this bill could be used to downgrade existing classes of lands that are conserved right now.

My question to you is, would you make a commitment with this bill to make sure that existing conservation areas and provincial parks will remain as is, that their ecological functions won't be reduced and that the protective status of species that exist there and habitats will not be downgraded as a result of this bill?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you, MPP Shaw. All parks under these two classifications would remain as part of the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act with ecological protection already written into legislation that's not proposed to be changed under this bill. There's no reason for anyone to believe that there will be a degradation of protections as a result of this bill.

MPP Shaw, you referenced your perspective that I haven't attempted to answer your question. I actually have, and I would like to try once again. There was a consideration of near-urban class parks in the 1970s. It was not part of the original classification system. When the time came for Uxbridge to be created, there was no classification for it. It was not available as part of the legislation. So while this—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: So does that section propose near-urban park classification? Is that what you're saying? Because there are urban class parks in the bill. Are you suggesting that that is to consider a near-urban park designation? Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair, to MPP Shaw: The near-urban was used by the bureaucracy in terms of its concept. I'm providing a concept here called "urban class," but it's effectively the same thing.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay. All right. I'm going to move on, because the thing that's really concerning to people right now is Bill 5. As you will know, Bill 5 has gone a long way again to continuing to delist endangered species and endangered habitats, and there's all kinds of outrage against it, including the Chiefs of Ontario—

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Shaw—a point of order.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: We're talking about Bill 26, not Bill 5 at this present time. So could we concentrate on Bill 26, please?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Let's focus on Bill 26, please.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Right. So the context of Bill 26 is that the provincial legislation is taking away protection for species at risk which exist in provincial parks. You would know, given that you put this bill forward, that there are approximately 700 protected species that exist in provincial parks all across Ontario, and the concern is that Bill 5 will impact provincial parks as well.

So my question to you is, how can you ensure, and what are you doing to make sure, now that you've opened up this act to make changes, that the overriding removal of protections in Bill 5 will not affect the species at risk that exist in our provincial parks?

0940

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair, to MPP Shaw: Bill 26 does not propose in any way reducing the protections already afforded under the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act. There is nothing written in Bill 26 that implies that, there is nothing in the bill that would suggest that and so there is nothing in the bill that would lead to that sort of outcome.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I appreciate that it's not in the bill, but you will understand that the context of this province is the overriding Bill 5, which gives this government unprecedented powers to make all kinds of unilateral changes.

Let's go back to what I'm really concerned about and which many people are concerned about, which is Wasaga Beach Provincial Park. The reason I keep asking you about that classification is that in order for the provincial park to

be sold to developers as is currently the plan—almost 650 acres—the part of the conservation reserves act would require legislative approval to remove land over 1% of the park's area, which is actually happening at Wasaga Beach.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Point of order?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Point of order.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Chair. We're talking about Bill 26. We're not talking about what was in the FES or Bill 5. Can we concentrate on Bill 26 today?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Chair, they are opening the act. This bill opens up the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act. I'm talking about the act that they have opened up with this bill. I'm perfectly on point here.

There are a number of people who are concerned about the changes that are being made at Wasaga Beach. I have a resident in my riding, David Feeny, who said that they are really very concerned that this will set a dangerous precedent for all protected areas in Ontario and may pass critical oversight processes. And also Martin Renters, who is another constituent in my riding, said, "I'm writing to let you know that I'm firmly against the government's plan to sell off 60% of Wasaga Beach Provincial Park beach-front lands to developers."

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: So you have opened up a bill that would—

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Point of order.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Chair, this is vexatious.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Go ahead, MPP Cuzzetto.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Are you reserving my time?

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: If we're talking about other bills, let's talk about building the four SMRs at Darlington-2 right now.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Chair, the government members don't understand that they have opened up the act to which I'm referring.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Let's focus on Bill 26, MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay. So my question to you is—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We're not discussing government policies.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Do you know what, Chair? Point of order? They have opened up the provincial act that affects all the provincial parks. So while Bill 26 is referring to this one piece, they've opened up the act to make changes. That's what I'm talking about. Wasaga Beach is under this act, and this government is trying to sell it off to developers. And, quite clearly, they don't want to—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, MPP Shaw. Your time is up.

We will move to MPP Tsao.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: I want to focus a bit on consultation. As I noted earlier, whenever you're making these types of decisions, it's critical to make sure we have proper consultation with local communities, Indigenous stakeholders, ecological stakeholders to make sure that we have the vast range of opinions to make sure that we got to a

proper point. In terms of this bill, how is consultation incorporated into this bill when making these decisions?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you, MPP. There is consultation, as I described earlier, with the Environmental Registry of Ontario where public feedback is solicited with the creation of/change to any number of the provincial park properties. The public is invited to take part in that. As we've seen with all the previous initiatives on urban parks, whether it be our provincial one with Uxbridge, or national, the Indigenous communities, the local municipalities and local conservation groups have all been part of the planning process in advancing the project to a point where it could be regulated.

So all the consultation when it comes to developing these lands comes prior to it arriving at the government level. They're borne from an idea as to how to make the community better—typically grassroots. Obviously, I would love to have a managed system that has some degree of planning to it, as envisioned by the bill, but, ultimately, there's no shortage of opportunity to consult as to whether the ideas are sound or not. In the future, should this bill pass and there is a regulation that is brought forward to create a park, undoubtedly that opportunity to provide feedback will be part and parcel of the process, and all stakeholders will have a chance to have their say.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: What I'm hearing from you, then is, the main way of consultation is through the ERO, which is true of all legislation that comes before the House before it becomes enshrined in law, but we also know that the ERO allows people to submit their feedback and then the government can choose whether or not to even have that heard at committee, like today.

We know the government often chooses not to bring bills to committee and it just goes simply through the House, which would mean that although a stakeholder submits a consultation through the ERO, it's not actually given an open hearing like today. And I understand. Sometimes you're going to be speedy, but these types of decisions, when you're creating a brand new park, are serious work. We really need to make sure that we're focused, that we're making the right decisions here and that everyone's voices are heard.

Is there a reason why there is no build-out in this bill to ensure that Indigenous input is heard, that local input is heard and any other stakeholders, to ensure that we go beyond the ERO?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you for that question. I would say the government does have a consultative process in all of its initiatives with Indigenous communities. I certainly have a personal relationship with my local First Nation, and I'm grateful for it. They're incredible people, the Caldwell First Nation. They have certainly been part and parcel of all planning initiatives related to our Ojibway National Urban Park.

With that, I would challenge the concept that they're not involved. They are involved through any number of directions, and should we not include them, we will hear from them and there will be a lot of conversation—and I'd say unneeded if it gets that point because the right thing to

do is to reach out first. But it is prescribed. It is expected of our government legislation—and this is my private member's bill, so it's not coming from the government; it's coming from myself.

My vision is certainly to be inclusive and to have consultation as the proposals are developed for parkland and for how it will be implemented.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: So then you believe that additional requirements for Indigenous consultation or ecological consultation in general are not required in your bill because what is in existence, prescribed by government, is enough?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair—and just in response, I believe the consultation does happen, and should there be a feeling that it hasn't happened, we certainly hear about it as MPPs.

Ultimately, it's important that, for the success of all projects, you'd be as open-minded and collaborative as possible, and that's certainly my vision with these two new classifications of parks.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: That's the thing with success. I want to see more urban national parks; I think they're fantastic, so I want to make sure that this bill has every chance to succeed and to really support Ontarians and people in urban settings to access parks.

I'm trying to foresee potential problems because we've had—and I won't name the bills because I don't want to upset certain members on the committee—but we've seen cases here where bills come before our committee and Indigenous groups have come here, ecological groups have come here and said, "This is not enough consultation. We are very upset," but still the bill goes forward.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: So the premise that it won't go forward because Indigenous groups or ecological groups oppose, I think, perhaps, is a fallacy.

Would you support adding anything in this bill to beef up the requirement for Indigenous, ecological and other stakeholder input as a requirement under this bill specifically?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you for that. I am open-minded to seeing what's put forward, and I'd love to see what you may have in mind. Any way to improve the bill is something that I certainly appreciate because I would love to see this bill be successful.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Well, I appreciate that openness. I'm sure we can work together to try to put that forward, and I hope that all members of the committee would be happy to support that. I hope to ensure that consultation with Indigenous groups, ecological groups and local stakeholders—it's always made sure that they're heard in consultation when anything is trying to be made under this legislation.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, MPP Tsao. The time is up.

We move to the government side. MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank member Dowie for bringing this bill forward.

0950

I live in a riding called Mississauga–Lakeshore, which is right on Lake Ontario on the mouth of the Credit River. We have the Rattray Marsh, a beautiful park area; the rhododendron park; and now we're building the Jim Tovey conservation park, which is at the old Lakeview power plant, where they're building a development as well.

As we notice that we're densifying communities, we know that parks are very important to these communities. How will Bill 26 modernize parks and make it more accessible for different types of lifestyles that people are attracted to now?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Excellent question, MPP Cuzzetto. I don't have to look very far from my home, actually. I can just look across the lake—I don't live on the lake; I live about a block away from the lake. In the city of Detroit, the Michigan state government has initiated a number of initiatives on the north side of Lake St. Clair, one of which is an adventure centre aimed at bringing an outdoors experience to a urban setting. They have that in a repurposed manufacturing building. They have also created state parks along the riverfront to help incent these recreational opportunities for those who don't have a proximity to nature.

In the case that you've described with the former Lakeview site, it's really a pilot right now where you can really achieve anything. There are all kinds of ideas that are possible. If there should remain some buildings that could be repurposed, having a visitor's centre that brings forward that element of nature would be an incredible addition to Mississauga, as well as just the vistas, the landscapes that you're destined to have in the vicinity of Lake Ontario.

So I would say the sky is the limit in terms of the potential for that site, and for reclaiming this former site and making tremendous beneficial use-improvement to the site for generations to come. It could be anything from just encouraging the outdoors by the elements of a visitor centre to actual recreational activities and the spaces for it—say, a pump track for cycling with some plantings might be suitable. Fishing is a pretty outdoors-based recreational opportunity that we have; wouldn't it be great to have a real fishing hole to go sit by right by the lake?

So I would say that the possibilities are endless, and I'm grateful that opportunity exists in your constituency.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I just want to thank you very much for this. I really will support this bill; I believe in it. I think you're doing a great job here.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Gallagher Murphy.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, again, MPP Dowie. I wanted to talk a little bit about the adventure class parks. I understand there are different classifications, six classifications of parks. I know there's an adventure class park. I have constituents in my riding—again, I don't have any parks per se in my riding, but I do have people who seem to really like the adventure parks. I have constituents who will come and speak to me about the different types of sports that they do.

Given that I'm not much of—how shall I say—an adventuresome individual like that, I don't think I've ever been to an adventure park. I'm wondering if you could maybe talk a bit about what the benefits are of having an adventure park, because I definitely hear from my constituents who seem to love them. One in particular has even written a book called *Defy the Odds*, which was very interesting.

But over to you: What are the benefits of having an adventure park?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Through you, Chair: Thank you for that, MPP Gallagher Murphy. I can remember the first time I went to something I would describe as an adventure park. It was really a mix of what we would describe as treetop trekking and then a zipline. Ultimately, those types of activities do involve some alteration of the landscape. You have bolting into the rock; you have trees being altered to allow for the platform. So there is an ecological impact to that outdoor recreational opportunity.

Having said that, boy, there's probably no better way for you to be educated as to the value of protecting our natural environments because at a height, you have a completely different view of the world around you. The exhilaration that comes from having the wind in your face and just being part of that—it's a different atmosphere than the city and it really instills in you the desire to keep places like this going.

The activities could be mountain biking—and we have a lot of mountain biking attempts in our neck of the woods in the Windsor area where natural environments are used to create cycling tracks. Unfortunately, unless they're managed, they could cause ecological degradations. So let's manage these activities properly.

That's my vision—having these spaces to enjoy but having them managed in a way such that we do not have illegal uses and we are protecting everything that needs to be protected while opening the door and maintaining opportunities for outdoor recreation.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, because from what I understand and based on what you've said, I think this is a great physical activity for people—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up.

Thank you, MPP Dowie, and thank you, committee members. This concludes the morning portion of public hearings.

The committee is now recessed until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 0956 to 1300.

ONTARIO NATURE

GRAND(M)OTHERS ACT TO SAVE THE PLANET

MS. MEGAN EMANUELE

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee will resume public hearings on Bill 26. The remainder of our presenters will each have seven minutes for their presentation. The remaining 39

minutes of the time slot will be for questions from members of the committee. The time for questions will be broken down into two rounds of six and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of six and a half minutes for the official opposition and two rounds of six and a half minutes for the third party.

I will now call upon Andrés Jiménez Monge, Kathy Geczi and Megan Emanuele. I think Megan will join us virtually.

We will start with Andrés. The floor is yours.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Ontario Nature has been proud to work alongside successive provincial governments for nearly a century to help strengthen Ontario's park system, a legacy that supports local economies, outdoor recreation and the nature experiences Ontarians value.

Established in 1931, Ontario Nature is a conservation charity with a mission to protect wild species and wild spaces. Our 130,000 supporters come from communities across the province: urban, rural, northern and southern. Our Nature Network's 150 member groups reflect the diversity of people who support, enjoy and depend on Ontario's landscapes.

Today, I'm here to speak in support of Bill 26 and to offer practical suggestions that strengthen it while keeping Ontario open for adventure, open for nature connection and open for future generations. Our suggestions stay firmly rooted in ecological integrity, the foundational purpose of Ontario's park system.

Ontario Nature has a long and rich history with Ontario's parks and conservation reserve system. We first proposed establishing such a system in 1935. In 1954, the Ontario Parks Act was passed, building on collaborative work by many partners, including Ontario Nature. In 1983, Ontario Nature's campaign contributed to the creation of 155 new parks totalling more than two million hectares. In 1997, with World Wildlife Fund Canada and Wildlands League, we formed the Partnership for Public Lands, securing a commitment to protect 2.4 million hectares across 378 new parks and conservation reserves. In 2006, we helped shape the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, the act that guides us today.

I highlight this history to demonstrate that Ontario Nature's work has always been grounded in collaboration with governments of all political stripes and the importance of our park system to our members and supporters. Ontario Nature supports any effort to expand our provincial park system in a way that maintains ecological integrity and respects Indigenous rights.

We see Bill 26 as an opportunity to strengthen Ontario's leadership in conservation while improving access to nature for families across the province. Any expansion should be paired with the resources needed to manage and maintain ecological integrity. Investing in stewardship upfront protects taxpayer assets, reduces long-term costs and ensures our parks remain safe and well-maintained destinations for recreation and tourism.

We enthusiastically support access to nature in our communities through the securement of public land and its

effective management. Urban parks offer newcomers, young families and seniors accessible outdoor spaces right in their communities, and strengthen Ontario's appeal as one of the most desirable places in Canada to build a life or grow a family. This was my case.

On the adventure class parks, we support the concept so long as "maintenance of ecological integrity" remains the first priority, as required under section 3.1 of the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act. Ecological integrity is the shared anchor, and recreational uses should complement, not risk, that purpose.

However, we request an amendment, or clarity added, to ensure that no existing provincial parks are reclassified as adventure class. Existing parks were classified following Indigenous engagement and community input for specific objectives. Maintaining those classifications protects ecological outcomes, honours earlier commitments and provides certainty for local communities and Indigenous partners.

We also caution against including motorized recreation—snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles—as core objectives of adventure class parks. In many landscapes, these uses are incompatible with maintaining ecological integrity and with the pan-Canadian standard for protected areas.

Where motorized recreation is appropriate, it should continue to be planned through established tools like land use planning, designated trails and regional processes, rather than expanding into sensitive areas. Clear direction today prevents conflict and enforcement issues later.

Provincial parks and conservation reserves should remain places where low-impact recreation limits ecological disturbance. As long as management decisions remain with Ontario park staff, supported by monitoring and enforcement, ecological and recreational needs can be balanced. This aligns with Ontario's practical, common-sense approach to park management.

Finally, we request removing the amendment adding "such other classes of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations." With the addition of urban and adventure classes, there are now eight classifications. Any further classes should be added through amendments to the act itself to maintain transparency and ensure full public and Indigenous participation. Removing this clause provides clarity for municipalities, industries and communities.

With these two amendments, (1) no existing parks reclassified as adventure class, and (2) removal of the clause allowing additional classification by regulation, Ontario Nature supports this bill. These changes strengthen Ontario's park system while preserving the ecological foundation that makes them worth visiting, worth camping in and a success.

To conclude, Ontario's natural areas are one of our most valuable legacies. They make this province resilient, support local economies and contribute to the physical and mental well-being of Ontarians. Our protected areas give families places to build core memories: hiking, paddling, camping and fishing. They maintain healthy watersheds, absorb carbon, offset flood risks and improve air quality,

reducing long-term costs for municipalities and helping safeguard communities and infrastructure.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: The government's interest in modernizing the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act opens the door to expanding and strengthening a system that has supported and inspired generation of Ontarians. By expanding our protected areas network we can keep pace with provincial leaders like Alberta and ensure Ontario remains competitive as a top province to live in.

People choose Ontario not only for opportunity but because of its access to high-quality natural spaces, assets that are increasingly rare across North America. Ontario Nature was pleased to see—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. Your time is up.

We move to our second witness. I would like to call upon Kathy Geczi. I am not sure if I said your name properly.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: It's pronounced "gate C," like at the airport.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Go ahead. You have seven minutes for your presentation.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: Thank you. Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members. My name is Kathy Geczi, and I'm a member of GASP, Grand(m)others Act to Save the Planet. But we are not just grandmothers; we are people of all ages. We are a climate action group with over 160 members across Ontario, and we've been active in the province since 2019. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about Bill 26, Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025.

Currently, our research shows that Ontario has 340 provincial parks and 295 conservation reserves. This sounds like a lot, and we agree with the government that there is a need for even more.

1310

We support the amendments in Bill 26 that increase and create urban parks. These urban parks will benefit the physical and mental health of Ontarians, people who may not otherwise have the means to enjoy the outdoors.

We stipulate, however, that both of the proposed categories of park, urban and adventure, adhere to the mission of all provincial parks, which say they must be "managed to maintain their ecological integrity" and preserved for future generations. We believe parks must not be established or created from existing parks or conservation reserves.

On October 21, 2025, in the Legislative Assembly, Mr. Dowie here, MPP for Windsor–Tecumseh, said that "for decades, Ontario's provincial parks have offered places of rest, reflection and, truly, renewal. They are part of who we are." We couldn't agree more with Mr. Dowie and feel that this should be a guiding principle to any amendments made to the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act.

We believe that Bill 26, as it is written now, falls short of these goals. Bill 26 should be amended to make its intentions transparent to residents, and it must be rigorous in its protection of delicate ecosystems. The public needs to be made aware of proposed amendments, their impact and the criteria used to determine how these new parks will be established.

Ontarians deserve transparency and accountability from their government, and the proposed changes are concerning. Phrases in the act, such as in section 8 that says “may or may not require alterations to the natural environment,” are ambiguous and worrisome.

We would like to see some changes, and we have five suggested amendments.

First, we would like to suggest that there be real protection and increased funding for the expansion of existing and creation of new wilderness parks.

Second, we recommend that Bill 26 be amended to include mandatory environmental assessments that include an ecological inventory of endangered species, significant wetlands and delicate ecosystems, and that these analyses be taken into account to aid park classification.

Third, we would like to recommend that any provincial park classified as of November 1 of this year as wilderness, nature reserve, natural environment, waterway or recreation remain as such and not be reclassified as an adventure or urban park.

Fourth, adventure parks—and we quote Tyler Watt, MPP from Nepean, when he spoke in the Legislative Assembly on October 1 regarding section 8 of Bill 26—introduce “high-impact recreational use ... without clearly defining where, how or under what safeguards those activities will be permitted.” That’s from Mr. Watt.

Will these adventure parks be privately owned? What is the business case for adventure parks? How will environmental assessments be applied? What criteria will be used to create these new categories of parks? These questions require answers, and must be clarified within the bill.

Our fifth and final suggestion for an amendment—Bill 26, on page 2, in the explanatory note listed after item (b), states, “The bill also authorizes the Lieutenant Governor in Counsel to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specifying objectives for ... parks....” We feel any decisions made regarding new park classification should be transparent and go through the Legislature. Let’s keep democracy alive.

In conclusion, we can all agree that provincial parks are necessary and that there is a need for more. We must ensure that our existing parks and conservation reserves stay whole and their categorization remains the same.

In a province the size of Ontario, surely we can find other land, other than our cherished provincial parks and conservation reserves, where we can relocate urban adventure parks. We must protect more natural spaces in Ontario for the benefit of Ontarians now, for our grandchildren and for future generations. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

We move to our third witness. Megan Emanuele will join us virtually.

Megan, go ahead. The floor is yours.

Ms. Megan Emanuele: My name is Megan Emanuele, and I speak to this committee just as a concerned citizen about this bill which will grant the provincial government the authority to reclassify crown land into two additional types of park classes. These classifications would grant the provincial government the ability to impose further regulations such as the requirement of a permit to access land and also the restrictions in regard to camping, foraging, hunting and exploring altogether. There are already currently restrictions surrounding the use of crown land to ensure the safety of the people who use it and also the plants and animals. This seems, at least from just a person’s perspective, I guess, as government overreach which is threatening to restrict the use of land that all Ontarians enjoy right now.

It is particularly concerning that it seems reminiscent of the Enclosure Movement that happened in England many centuries ago. This was when the nobility began to fence off more and more common land, which forced the majority of peasantry to move into the city to find work. While this is not obviously the exact situation happening right now, it’s nevertheless concerning when a government seeks to further control access to common spaces, especially when there’s already measures in place to ensure the safety of the people using it and the wildlife.

Personally, I do not see any benefit from this for any Canadians except for more regulation and more restriction. There’s a freedom that comes with crown lands that parks do not afford. Parks are much more regulated and create greater restrictions and barriers to those who use the land, especially in terms of camping and exploring. This takes away also from community stewardship and transfers it to government stewardship and deprives the opportunities of citizens to form deeper relations to the lands and nature in their areas.

I’m also concerned as to what areas of crown land will be reclassified. At least, I couldn’t find it saying anywhere what specific locations were being considered, but I suspect it’s land closest to those living in the GTA, and southern Ontario more broadly, where most Ontarians live. This classification would essentially bar most Canadians from accessing crown land and force them into going only to parks, and as I mentioned before, parks have far greater restrictions.

I’m also unclear why it’s at this time the government is deciding to impose greater restrictions on Canadians when it seems this is the time Canadians are asking more than ever to have their freedoms to move across the land respected.

It also seems to be the case that the more governing bodies that try to conserve wild spaces, it often ends up de-wilding them in many ways and creating these sanctuaries instead of forcing people to actually come to be a part of the land and take on that responsibility for themselves instead of being hand-held through that process.

Also, there's a lot of citizen science that goes on in crown lands right now. I know of many groups who like to just go and explore and take note of the local flora, in particular. That information is so valuable, to have the freedom to go and explore and to make note themselves and not to be restricted to certain paths and certain timings and to need a permit to stay overnight and things like this.

As I'm sure you can probably tell by the way I'm talking, I'm not very versed in politics or anything, but personally, I feel that this is less of a political issue and really just one of people versus government, and versus control of governing bodies. Yes, I think it will be just a great loss for many local communities who have come to know their surrounding areas and who take pride in being the stewards of that land.

So, I guess that's all I really have to say. It's not very long, but—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Thank you very much to all three of our presenters.

1320

We will start the question-and-answer period. The first round, we will start with the official opposition. MPP Shaw, you have six and a half minutes.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: First of all, I want to thank all three of you for deputing here today and for your testimony. You can see how our beloved provincial parks are being potentially managed by the government is a concern for everyone—young and old, if I may say so—and so it's really fantastic to see a young person like yourself taking such a great interest.

I just have one question for you—our time is short here, Ms. Emanuele; I would ask you a lot of questions. You did an excellent job deputing here today. I'm really grateful that you took the time to do this.

My question for you is if you could just again restate your concerns with this bill: that it will take away community stewardship and community oversight and put it in the hands of the government. You called it government overreach with this bill. Could you just restate that again for me?

Ms. Megan Emanuele: Sure. It just seems that often, whether it's government or other governing bodies, whenever they try to—and again, this is a broad generalization, but when they try to create safe or more conserved land, they very rarely take into account the people who are already there, who have been not only stewards of the land, but really learning from it and having all that local knowledge. It often gets displaced by those governing bodies who come in and then try to put new rules and new fences around areas. Often a lot is lost there.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you very much. I agree with you, and I think that Indigenous communities are feeling the same way, that their understanding of the land is not being included, or consultation is not included in this bill. Thank you for that perspective. I share your concerns.

And now to GASP, Grand(m)others Acting to Save the Planet. You guys are notorious. Can I just say that?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: We are?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I want to commend you for the work that you have done. Your group was at the forefront of, I would just call it, an uprising when this government tried to basically steal all of the lands of the greenbelt. That was your group, with other groups, that really acted in a way that forced this government to back down. That's a huge success that we had in this province, so I want to commend you and thank you for that. I'm in the grandmother group, by the way, just so you know. I'm in that category, proudly so.

What I want to say, and I asked the member this morning—we have a government that has this track record of this heavy hand, of this government not listening to people, and really, you cannot point to any evidence that this government respects or takes care of natural land, of wetlands. We've just seen their behaviour. So you coming here to talk about some of the concerns I shared with the member, as well—I want to focus very specifically on our concern that I share, which is that some of this language is so vague, and the fact they've said in section 1, “9. Such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations.” and the absolute real concern that this bill will be used to downgrade protections of existing provincial parks. I share that concern.

I have also been around long enough to be suspicious when this government puts something this heavy in a private member's bill. Are you familiar with what's happening with Wasaga Beach Provincial Park and the government's sell-off of almost 650 acres?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: Yes.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I could actually read in this that they will use this bill to take over the provincial park in Wasaga Beach. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: A lot of provincial parks could be at risk.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: We know the piping plover is an endangered species in Wasaga Beach, and if we look at how this will impact other parks, one that comes to mind for us is Bronte Creek, sitting right in the middle of Oakville and Burlington—expensive, expensive land that I'm sure developers would like to get their hands on. So we are worried this will expand to all provincial parks.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes. I want to thank you for pointing out in the bill—I mean, we looked at it, but you pointed out again that it just says, “authorizes the Lieutenant Governor in Council”—which is cabinet—“to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specifying objectives for such parks”—which means objectives that are different than what's in the original bill.

All of this is disturbing and concerning language. It seems like a small thing. I mean, MPP Dowie's bill to make a park in his riding—that makes sense. But to use his bill as a vehicle for substantial government overreach is a disservice to his bill, a disservice to your constituents and a disservice to the people of the province of Ontario.

So, again, I want to say to you, the fact that this government doesn't really like environmental assessments—I brought up Ontario Place this morning. They bulldozed

Ontario Place without an environmental assessment. It's not a provincial park, but it certainly was a natural area.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: My question to you is, are you concerned this high-impact recreational activity will have a significant impact because they will not have an environmental assessment? And I will quickly say, MPP Dowie this morning himself said that it could have an ecological impact with that type of activity. So do you want to speak a little bit about that?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: For sure. Climate change is upon us, and we know that species are endangered. We know that we need wetlands. We need to protect delicate ecosystems. And you're right: The government doesn't seem to have a good track record on doing environmental assessments.

We're not saying we don't want parks. We want parks, and we're okay with urban and adventure parks. We just want to be careful about the number of species that are becoming endangered. I walked yesterday at Crawford Lake, and on the path they have statues of all the species that are endangered and—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up.

We will move to the third party: MPP Tsao.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: I want to thank all of our deputies for being here today. It's very much appreciated. I believe, Andrés, you didn't finish your statement. Would you care to finish the statement you had prepared? Feel free.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Thank you very much. It's just a couple of paragraphs.

Ontario Nature was pleased to see the government's latest proposal under the expanding protected areas project and encourages rapidly expanding our protected areas network through continued collaboration with Indigenous nations, civil society and industry to identify opportunities for locally supported well-managed protections.

Protected areas unite Ontarians. The province's own Protected Areas Working Group found that 86% of Ontarians support creating more parks. People see parks as part of what makes Ontario home: places to birdwatch, find medicinal plants, hunt, fish, camp, hike and pass traditions on to their children. Nature is part of who we are as Canadians. Protecting it is a commitment to the prosperity, health and long-term well-being of this province. Thank you so much—and thank you, MPP Tsao.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: You're welcome.

I took a few notes when you were speaking. I noticed that you raised some concerns which I touched on earlier, and I wanted to get your opinion. You mentioned that ecological integrity and Indigenous rights are an important factor when you're looking at this work—and others please feel free to join in as well—do you believe that this bill includes enough ability for Indigenous groups to be consulted when creating these parks?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: I believe it has been stated that some of the language of the bill is not decisive enough in certain cases, with words like “may.” That's why we suggest the two amendments that we think are

very important. That includes not reclassifying any of the existing protected areas, as there were conversations, discussions, agreements and empowerment of people over these areas, and having that clarity and certainty is absolutely critical as we move forward.

Second, it is important that any changes to include new types of areas come back through the legislation so they have the right level of consultation.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Ms. Geczi or Ms. Emanuele, do you have anything to add as well to that issue? I saw your head nodding, so I wanted to know if you had a thought on that.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: I think that the opportunity for the cabinet to make changes without it going through the Legislature is a huge concern for me, because it means they can bypass—

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Yes, absolutely.

The other thing I noticed here is you both spoke about the concerns in the bill that allows “such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations,” so this open category of “other.” Can you elaborate—either of the three of you—on what is the concern that you have particularly about this ability?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: Other classifications—Ontarians need to know what's going on. We need transparency. We want to protect our land and our parks and our animals.

Andrés, did you want to—

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Yes. For me, the removal of the clause allowing additional classifications by regulation is critical because it might just bring us into a space of conflict and having to go through a lot of discussions that could be avoided and would be unnecessary if we always go through the consultation process that is required for the act.

1330

I recognize that what we might gain in flexibility, we would lose in our capacity to get to shared meanings of what it means to protect land and to have that land protected for all Ontarians.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Earlier this morning, I was asking about consultations, and MPP Dowie assured me that the ERO would be enough in terms of consultation process. Do you believe that the ERO process would be enough in terms of ensuring consultation from Indigenous groups, ecological groups and local groups to make sure that we're making wise decisions? It's an online registry where you can submit your comments.

Do you believe that's enough, or should more be done in this bill to ensure consultation?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: MPP Tsao, could you elaborate? If the ERO would be enough for what?

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: This bill right now, when I asked MPP Dowie about consultation, to ensure that we have strong Indigenous consultation and economical consultation actually built into the bill, I was told that the ERO process that already exists should be sufficient.

Do you believe that's sufficient or do you believe there should be something actually built into the bill requiring more consultation?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Sorry, one more question: consultation for the creation of the bill or consultation once a new area is created?

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Creating new parks through this bill.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: It's too easy online to avoid reality.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Ms. Geczi, would you like to go ahead while Andrés considers?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: It's too easy online to avoid what citizens really want, so I would think we need more opportunity to submit and speak with people.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: To actually speak to people.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: The ERO is an important process for people to provide feedback, but I believe that when we are taking crown land and are creating a new protected area, further consultation is required in order to fully ensure that Indigenous rights are being honoured.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Right. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We move to the government side. MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks to all the witnesses for coming out today. I appreciate it.

Through you, Chair, my question is to Andrés. It is encouraging to hear you say that you support active nature in the parks. I think that's a lot of what this bill is about.

What role do you think adventure class parks could play in promoting healthy, active lifestyles?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: I was speaking with one of our members, an elderly person, and she said, "Well, it depends on what adventure means to you." She was saying that, for her, adventure is birding. That's maybe some of the clarity that needs to be added when it comes to the bill: What does "adventure" mean and where is this adventure brought forward?

We see some parks—I just went to Bon Echo—in which very established climbing routes are effective. They keep the ecological integrity of the place, and it allows people and communities to enjoy. While we see other provincial parks in which it is hard to enforce the climbing routes, and that might affect the integrity of the bluffs and escarpments and all those ecological values.

I think it's enriching to include new ways of enjoying nature, or maybe existing ways of enjoying nature, as long as we manage to keep that ecological integrity, which is the original purpose of the act.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: That's fair. Thank you.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: Can I respond?

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Yes.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: I think we know that ATVs trample all kinds of delicate ecosystems, plants, small insects—birds rely on insects—it's all connected, right? ATVs rambling through parks is probably not ideal, but if we could just have a few designated parks where that happens, and maintain our ecological integrity elsewhere, it would be wonderful.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: But I think that is the intent of the bill.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: Yes, but it's not clear.

Megan has her hand up.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay, Megan, go ahead.

Ms. Megan Emanuele: I just have concern with the adventure class, but more so, it seems like there's this emphasis on creating certain routes and that's how you enjoy nature. Again, I guess that's my greatest concern with the idea of parks and this bill as opposed to crown land, is that it's just one way you can enjoy the space, one way that you can enjoy nature, as opposed to the people who are using crown land—at least the people that I know that are using crown land, and myself—you don't trample the land. You respect the land, but you're also a part of it. So to say that you can only walk here and that you can only explore within these constraints, again, that's not really what wild is.

I think that's the beauty of crown land, is that it lets people actually experience the wildness of Ontario's and Canada's nature, and then, because of that, gain a deeper love and respect for it, and actually want to fight more and preserve it more, versus just in pretty parks.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: That's why there are different classifications, though. Not all activities can be done in each park. Certain ones, they will be just for walking in. But this is just opening up new avenues, and especially, moving forward, with any new parks that we are bringing on board.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: May I—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Andrés, you have an additional comment?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Yes. I think it's important to add that Ontario has only 11% of its area protected, and increasing that protection to higher percentages akin to Alberta and Quebec would address part of this concern.

Also, it greatly depends on the size of the park in comparison to the size of the area that will be developed for recreational activity. In general, the 25% rule applies, meaning that 75% is regulated for ecological integrity and 25% can be regulated for compatible uses that do not risk the goal of protection of the area.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay, any further comments before we move to the next question?

MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: There's all kinds of age and culture of people using our parks and it's sometimes hard for everybody to agree on what the perfect position is. What role do parks play in helping people understand the value of Ontario's natural heritage?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: It's a critical role for people to connect with nature. Many of my critical discoveries of nature in this province since I got here nine winters ago have happened in provincial parks, but also in places, as our other witness was saying, that are not protected. But this is part of those options available for folks and for people.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: I think Ontarians have a range of things that they want to do in parks. Some people want to

have a wild, fun time, get lots of exercise and challenge themselves in the outdoors, and other people just want to have peaceful bird watching, walking and enjoying the trees and the sun. So there's a range.

You asked what role parks have. It depends on the person, but we want to make sure that the nature is protected while everyone's enjoying it.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: So, in a way, should we try and have parks for everyone, or should we just have parks for certain people, then? The ones that want to be adventurous and do things: You would agree that that's a role for a park?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: I think adventure parks would be okay, as long as we have some clear rules about what's going to go on and what is going to be done to protect delicate areas. We're not opposed to the urban or adventure; we just want to be really clear on the guidelines for them.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Any further comments? We have eight seconds left. Okay, thank you very much.

We'll move to the second round of questioning. MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I am going to direct the remainder of my time—it's very short—to Andrés. Thank you for being here.

I want to be clear that we are not opposed to what was originally the intent of this private member's bill, which was building on the work of MPP Lisa Gretzky from Windsor and Brian Masse—also an MP—who did work at the federal level to make sure that we could have an Ojibway prairie provincial nature reserve in Windsor. That's something we fully agree with. Members of our party supported that and did a lot of the groundwork to make that a reality so that Mr. Dowie's bill could be before us.

We are concerned that this bill is being used essentially as a Trojan horse to do what is a good piece of work—which is to establish this national urban park—but they're slipping in, as this government does, a lot of latitude to allow them to potentially downgrade the protections that already exist and concentrate all the power in the minister's office or the Cabinet Office, to change designations of parks or to make designations.

1340

You raised these concerns, and we share these concerns. My question to you is, do you think this government will accept your amendment, which is to take out these vague and controversial pieces of this bill so that we can wholeheartedly embrace what was originally a sound and transparent motion on behalf of the PC government?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Thank you, MPP Shaw. I am very familiar with the Friends of Ojibway Prairie, who are a Nature Network group—frontier nature. I've visited the park. It's been such a wonderful experience, and I hope we get to see that park come to life. It will be incredible for all of Ontario and for Windsor, which is doing such amazing things.

As I stated during my intervention, I cannot speak for what the government—or I cannot speak for the government, but it is, in our opinion, absolutely necessary to eliminate the possibility of existing parks being reclassified for this bill to be stronger, and also to remove the clause allowing additional classification by regulation and make it very clear that whatever park gets created, it will support the purpose of the original act, which has been good. It has supported so many people's experiences with nature, and that's why 86% of Ontarians want parks, because they enjoy them and they benefit from them. And this is the thing: If you don't keep the ecological integrity of the park, then it is not a place that you want to go to because you wouldn't be able to have the experiences that you have. That's why you go to the park because you will see a Canada warbler; you'll see medicinal plants; or you're going to be quiet and enjoy nature.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you for that. I would appreciate seeing what language you would use for an amendment that we could move. Either the third party or the official opposition would be happy to have a look at that and move it on your behalf.

What I would also like to add is, I know that Ontario Nature has done phenomenal work. One of the things that your organization spoke out against was the changes in Bill 5 that would significantly water down and, in fact, eliminate the Endangered Species Act. My concern is that with that as an overriding backdrop to this provincial parks bill, this will also impact the many endangered species and habitats that are in our provincial parks and reserves across the province.

Can you just speak a little bit—if you have concerns—about the downgrading of protections for endangered species in and around provincial parks?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: I'm going to start with the second part of that question. Ontario Nature has come to this committee and has spoken to all of you about your concerns with Bill 5, and we've made it absolutely clear that we are in opposition to Bill 5 and that we are in opposition to the watering down of the species-at-risk legislation.

I like to understand nature as a totality. If you create a protected area and then you eliminate the environment around it, you will end up with a flowerpot. That flowerpot is going to have a whole bunch of plants, some of them invasive, some of them not. It's likely not going to have the animals that we love, and it's not going to have the turtles that we love or the birds that we love. So it is important to see the landscape in its totality for it to be able to be viable. What does this mean? It means that the disappearance of species at risk in the province will impact how many species at risk are in these protected areas that we love.

A short answer will be that every time we look at legislation, we need to look at it in tandem with other legislation and what the effects are that it's generating.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: When it comes to the language, as I mentioned, we would like to see section 9 eliminated, and we would like to add a provision that no existing parts will be reclassified as adventure parks.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Very quickly, the time is short: We talked about the ERO. I just want you to know, and to put on the record, that this government was found to have broken the law when it comes to the ERO, when it comes to the Environmental Bill of Rights, which is a law in the province of Ontario. The Auditor General found that they had broken the law. The courts have found that they broke the law.

So for this government to say that the ERO will be satisfactory consultation process for Indigenous groups, for stewards of this land, their track record shows that they don't respect, to be honest, nature or environmental species, and they don't respect the law of the land, which is our Environmental Bill of Rights. And so, I will just put it to you—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Shaw. The time is up.

We will move to MPP Tsao.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: When I review the bill, one of the concerns I came across—and I heard this reflected in your comments—was the lack of a mandatory EA for the designation of adventure class parks. I know you mentioned that, Ms. Geczi, in your comments. I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more on why you think a mandatory EA would be important in this bill.

Ms. Kathy Geczi: I think that we're observing a pattern with this government where commercial interests are more important than environmental interests. We wonder if there might be an ulterior motive with this legislation so that more private businesses can profit from our parks. Our second suggested amendment was to include mandatory environmental assessments.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Looking at the track record of the government, whether it be on Bill 5 or its disastrous moves on the greenbelt, we now have a bill that could possibly allow reclassification of existing parks, additional classes by regulation. In theory, we all support additional parks, but it's these kinds of vague statements that gives them these sweeping powers that are concerning.

Given this government's past history, would you trust the government to act properly if given these powers through this bill?

Ms. Kathy Geczi: No. That's the whole reason we're here. We want to have more clarification about what is planned and we want that in the legislation. Why be mean? It's a huge province.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Yes, exactly.

Andrés, would you like to comment?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Yes. I think it's important to say that as long as the management and planning decisions remain with Ontario Parks, that is absolutely critical.

It is also important to remember that in 2020, the Auditor General reported that Ontario Parks is under-

resourced, citing a lack of staff for park planning and ecological monitoring, impacting its ability to protect natural areas, particularly in southern Ontario. We know there are a lot of competing pressures on our natural areas and a significant need for nature-based recreation. That is real.

Given the resource challenges at Ontario Parks, we are aware of concerns that many provincial parks have raised questions about the effective implementation of the act. It is important that if we take on more provincial protected areas, we make sure that we can see them as healthy places for all of us to go visit and enjoy.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Megan, did you have anything that you would like to add?

Ms. Megan Emanuele: Maybe it might be, I guess, a little shifting—but my concern, really, with the parks in general is that—even Andrés just said right now that Ontario Parks is experiencing low staffing to help with implementing—I don't know the exact phrasing—but basically to help manage the park, is my understanding.

But again, there are so many citizens, just normal people, who are going on crown land who are really taking it upon themselves—there are a lot of grassroots, amazing community movements that are happening that don't get recognized because we're not formal organizations. We're just friends and family going out and caring for the land, and I think that gets lost in parks. Whether it's from the government or from another outside institution, it becomes this top-down project instead of a grassroots project, and I think that if you want ecological preservation, it has to come from the community, not from the government.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Right.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: I think on that note it's important to have a good starting point to commit to implement and invest in the Ontario biodiversity strategy, which has been collaboratively developed by experts across the province to support all the grassroots groups to care for biodiversity as a whole in the province.

1350

But also, Ontario Nature and 40 other organizations submitted budget recommendations in May asking the government of Ontario to invest in nature to the tune of \$230 million per year for the next four years, which would match Quebec's annual investment in their nature strategy. This is perfectly reasonable, given the size of Ontario's economy relative to Quebec's.

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Go ahead, Megan.

Ms. Megan Emanuele: With all due respect, all this money is probably just going to go to bureaucracy. Again, really, it comes from people caring for the land themselves. I think, again, this committee for the most part is really blind to a lot of what's going on at the local level, the really small groups that are out here. In the Halton region alone I can think of a handful of groups that just go out. These spaces are so important to us.

Ms. Megan Emanuele: So it's not just that there are these new classes of parks; it's that the crown land itself is in jeopardy.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Tsao.

We move to the government side: MPP Gallagher Murphy.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Through you, Chair, to Megan: Thank you very much, Megan, for joining us here today. I've got a couple of questions for you based on a lot of your deputation today. My question would be, have you ever visited a provincial park in Ontario and, if so, which one would you say is your favourite provincial park and why?

Ms. Megan Emanuele: Honestly, probably Bronte Creek Provincial Park, just because when I was a kid we would drive there. I guess it's just the memories from being there as a kid. I haven't been recently, but I know that the forests there were really great and in the spring you can go see the fiddleheads. I don't know if it was legal, but I know people would sometimes wild harvest some of the fiddleheads and things like that. It was just cool to see. I guess that was my first encounter with people foraging and really being connected to the land in that way. From there, it kind of grew out.

So I have nothing against provincial parks. I'm just leery of the fact that this will give the government the opportunity to start classifying areas of crown land and then imposing greater restriction on access to that land, whether it be through permits in order to, I don't know, forage or to camp. You have to book a camp spot; you can't just go and spend your time there. That's really where my concern is.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you for that. Just to follow up on that, as you're probably aware—or you may not be aware—our population has grown to 15 million here in Ontario, and that is going to continue to grow greatly. So when I think about all the newcomers coming to our province, a lot of people will come to the cities for work, obviously, and they're going to want to explore the great outdoors. Not everybody is going to be able to travel north or to many of the very open crown lands that are available—because we know there's a lot in this province, but most of them are north of us.

That being the case, how do we manage to ensure that all newcomers can have that experience of the great outdoors with our parks if it's not government being able to classify an area and really designate those areas for people, especially closer in the city?

Ms. Megan Emanuele: Yes, absolutely. I guess my first thing would be, with that population boom, how is that coming? It's probably coming from mass immigration, right? That would be my main concern: Are we immigrating people responsibly and at a rate that we can actually support them? I think that's the main thing when we talk about immigration and this big boom of population growth.

But just on parks: There are lots of parks in general. Again, I don't have anything against parks per se. My issue is, I distrust the government and its use of re-

designating this crown land. That's kind of what it boils down to, and I don't—

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Okay. Thank you, Megan.

My next question would be for Andrés. Thank you very much to Ontario Nature for being here today. I greatly appreciated your deputation. I also appreciated the history that you've provided, because obviously Ontario Nature and the provincial government have worked collaboratively for many, many years. I think that is a testament to ensuring that we are taking care of nature, obviously, as much as we possibly can.

When I heard you talking about improving expansion for families, for that recreation as well—that's wonderful. Something you commented on, or you suggested, was in the classifications, and you commented about exceptions with motorized vehicles. I wanted to go back to that comment there because I wanted to understand more, Andrés, what your thoughts were on the motorized, I guess, versus non-motorized. If you could comment there, and then I've got a follow-up for you as well.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Yes. In general, vehicles in very wild areas, depending where they are, will be damaging for wildlife, of course. You can go to Tommy Thompson Park during the spring and you will see snakes and you will see young birds that are killed by bikes.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: When you see some provincial areas where there's salamander crossing, you could also see them dead. So when it comes to the use of vehicles—and motorized vehicles have the addition of the noise that they produce that can mask the sounds of birds—I would say that it's always a case-by-case basis, and that the 25%-to-75% ratio has guided a lot of the decisions in a worldwide arena and also can guide them here.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: So doesn't it make sense that we plan accordingly, then?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Absolutely.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Perfect. Thank you.

Then my last question, a follow-up, really quick: What kinds of stories or experiences from your work highlight the importance of accessible diverse park spaces?

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: So many. Our Nature Network groups—a lot of groups, like the Friends of Ojibway Prairie, that are trying not only to create parks that they enjoy and steward them at a grassroots level—not only on Ontario Nature reserves; we hold 26 reserves—but also supporting other areas—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, Andrés. The time is up.

Mr. Andrés Jiménez Monge: Thank you very much to everyone.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you to all three presenters. That concludes the first panel. Thank you very much for coming and sharing your opinion and ideas with us. We will be ready in a few minutes for the next panel.

We will recess for five minutes.

The committee recessed from 1358 to 1404.

MS. NINA DEEB
 ONTARIO FEDERATION OF
 TRAIL RIDERS
 ONTARIO TRAILS
 PRESERVATION ALLIANCE
 WILDERNESS COMMITTEE

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Welcome back.

We will move to our second panel of the day. We have with us Nina Deeb, the Ontario Federation of Trail Riders, the Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance and the Wilderness Committee. Each witness, you have seven minutes.

We will start with Nina Deeb. Please introduce yourself, and the floor is yours.

Ms. Nina Deeb: Good afternoon, Chair and committee members. My name is Nina Deeb. I have been a full-time real estate broker in Ontario for 30 years. I've studied real estate and land for 31 years.

It has been presented that these amendments would expand the protected space we have in the province of Ontario by introducing two new classifications of provincial parks that allow for increased outdoor recreation. And there is something very vague that's also been added.

I am supportive of this bill with one amendment and adding some necessary guardrails.

This bill, as written, gives the province of Ontario the ability to create new park classes through regulation. The bill "authorizes the Lieutenant Governor in Counsel"—cabinet—"to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specify objectives for such parks...." This is vague.

The government could create new categories; reclassify lands, including existing parks, which could be downgraded; and invent new park categories, which could prioritize tourism or any other provincial priority over the ecological integrity of existing wetlands and animal habitats.

Consultations must occur. If it's public land and public money, the people of Ontario must continue to be consulted with.

As a neighbour and steward of an urban park, it is noted that while the population increases and more people are using the park, the intended size of the park is shrinking.

The Huron Natural Area, which I have been defending in my local municipality, was originally planned to be 369 acres. However, it's now being developed on four fronts. Lands that were intended to be acquired and added since 1992 have not been. One of the three ponds that visitors to this urban park area visit is wholly on land owned by a developer.

I discovered that my neighbour lands are owned by a developer. The local residents discovered that the wetlands buffer minimum had been reduced to only 30 metres by provincial legislation last year. Wetlands function as filters and cleaners of our ground water, in addition to being a habitat for wildlife.

Within Ontario's parks, public spaces and conservation authorities, there are many changes that are being made

simultaneously. Ontario's 36 conservation authorities are being reduced to seven. Ontario's most valuable waterfront lands are being privatized. Provincial protections are being removed from parts of Wasaga Beach, removing 60% of the world's longest freshwater beach.

From the fall economic statement, almost the whole of the Exhibition Place grounds are being captured as part of the Rebuilding Ontario Place Act. This contradicts the statement of the goal as addition, not subtraction, because we are losing parklands that we already have.

MPP Gélinas remembers when option 9 was tried in her community as Ivanhoe park. The new class of park meant that it was a non-operating, no-maintenance-or-service class of park. The city of Timmins had to step in to pay to keep the provincial park open.

A provincial park is provincial responsibility. A shift of park class must not mean deregulation of existing parks or downloading of the operation and maintenance of a provincial park onto the local municipality.

Protected public spaces must not be developed or contracted behind closed doors. The public can't lose access to public lands, as is the case with the Ontario Place lease for 95 years. These business arrangements and enhancements to public lands must also provide a benefit to the people of Ontario.

Consultations are reduced to just conversations when the conversations take place 11 days after the decisions are made and the lease is signed. Duty to consult with Indigenous nations applies to the federal and provincial government. It's a constitutional requirement.

The people of Ontario have a role to play. We should be consulted, too, prior to the decisions regarding valuable public lands being made. This new class of park avoids public consultations in the future. This is why I suggest to remove, by amendment, option 9, "Such other class of parks as may be prescribed by regulations."

1410

I am supportive of adding more parkland and access to natural areas, with necessary guardrails to protect the land, water and habitats—this includes human habitats.

Adventure parks don't just bring adventure; they also provide education and hundreds of jobs to their local communities. Adventure parks help to attract tourism and supports to the local community. Communities that have few economic resources could thrive with development of adventure parks, and this is a positive change.

There is opportunity to build economic bases and to improve access to nature. Park building will give even more people the opportunity to enjoy and explore beautiful Ontario. It will give our educators more options for education, and our students can experience what nature has to teach them.

Thank you for bringing this bill forward. And like I mentioned, I am supportive of it, but I would like to see some amendments added.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Nina.

We move to the Ontario Federation of Trail Riders and the Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance.

We have with us Lisa Thompson, but we have a colleague of yours who is going to join us via Zoom. So please introduce yourself and your title.

Ms. Lisa Thompson: Hello, I'm Lisa Thompson, and online with us is Carolyn Richards. She's in Kawartha Lakes. I will be doing the speaking, but we'll both be answering any questions.

Good afternoon, Chair and members of the Legislature. My name is Lisa. I'm the executive director of the Ontario trail riders, representing thousands of motorized users across Ontario, including off-road motorcycle riders. Our organization is also a founding partner of the Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance, which includes all motorized users and has support of the Schad Foundation as well as the Ontario Conservation Accelerator.

The Ontario trails preservation is working to protect, maintain and build Ontario's trail network for all users. I'm here today on behalf of the OTPA to express our support for Bill 26, Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025, and to offer a few suggestions to ensure that it is inclusive of all responsible motorized recreation including, off-road motorcycles and off-road vehicles, collectively known as ORVs, under the Ontario Off-Road Vehicles Act.

First, let me say that I am very appreciative of the vision behind this bill. The creation of new park classifications, particularly the adventure class parks, is a forward-thinking approach that recognizes how outdoor recreation is evolving. It acknowledges that people seek a wide range of experiences, from rock climbing and treetop trekking, to mountain biking and motorized uses such as snowmobiling, ATVing, motorcycling and four-by-fouring. By creating an adventure class park, this provides flexibility to deliver outdoor activities in a way that balances recreation with conservation, and it also reaches a broader spectrum of recreational users.

This is especially important for motorized trail users. Adventure class parks, as currently described, mention snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles. That is a step in the right direction; however, the language does not include other motorized users that fall under the current Off-Road Vehicles Act, such as off-road motorcycles and side-by-sides.

A key point I would like to address is that off-road motorcycles are a legitimate and widely practised form of outdoor recreation and have been for generations. Riders are often some of the most active volunteers when it comes to promoting safety, trail maintenance, environmental stewardship and forest management. By including the term "off-road vehicles," this legislation would acknowledge our contributions and clarify that these activities are considered compatible with the adventure class park model, provided that they are managed responsibly.

Responsible motorized recreation offers significant benefits. Off-road motorized recreationalists support local businesses and communities. The economic impact of the off-road industry in Ontario, not including snowmobiles and four-by-fours, is \$2.8 billion while creating 10,330 full-time jobs. It also pulls in \$365 million in tax revenue.

Riders and clubs are the primary investors in trail maintenance and development, donating and volunteering their time for ecosystem stewardship. We work collaboratively with landowners, including the province, the municipalities and conservation authorities. The work that our volunteers undertake benefits all users, including hikers, cyclists and equestrians. Motorized trail users contribute to rural and local economies through tourism and related spending. By specifically recognizing all ORVs in legislation, Ontario is acknowledging and supporting the economic and social benefits of our activities while continuing to protect natural heritage.

As already noted, we fully recognize the importance of conservation and the protection of our ecosystems. Adventure class parks are designated to provide opportunities for outdoor recreation that may require some landscape alterations. Responsible management, guided by clear rules and enforcement, ensures that motorized recreation can coexist with conservation goals. Ontario's motorized trail community has a strong track record of promoting sustainability, minimizing environmental impacts and educating riders on proper trail etiquette. We are committed to continuing this stewardship.

I would also like to encourage the Legislature to involve motorized trail organizations like the Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance, which includes all motorized user groups that fall under the Off-Road Vehicles Act, in the development of regulations and management plans for adventure class parks. Collaboration ensures that regulations are practical, enforceable and aligned with both recreation and conservation objectives. Collaboration also fosters mutual understanding and respect between motorized users, non-motorized users and park managers.

In conclusion, we support Bill 26 as an important step towards modernizing Ontario's provincial park system. It creates a framework for adventure class parks that recognizes a range of outdoor recreational activities. To make this legislation truly inclusive and effective, I respectfully ask that it includes the term "off-road vehicles" and stakeholder input from responsible user groups like the Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance. By doing so, by working together, we can provide a sustainable model for adventure class that balances environmental protections with access to diverse outdoor activities. We stand ready as the Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance and the Ontario Federation of Trail Riders to work with the ministry, park authorities and Legislature. We thank you for your time.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Lisa.

We move to our third witness. I would like to call upon the Wilderness Committee. Please identify yourself and your title.

Ms. Katie Krelove: My name is Katie Krelove, and I work as the Ontario biodiversity and protected places campaigner for the Wilderness Committee.

The Wilderness Committee is a national charitable organization that has worked for over 45 years to protect nature, defend wildlife and fight for strong climate action. The WC Ontario office works to advance the expansion of protected areas in the province to meet the federal target

of protecting 30% of lands and waters by 2030 as part of the global effort to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and as a nature-based solution to climate change. In this capacity, we have collaborated with community groups, ecologists and First Nations to identify some key biodiversity hot spots in need of protection, including old growth and intact forests, wetlands and proposed Indigenous protected and conservation areas.

In 2023, we spearheaded a letter to the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, signed by 124 organizations, requesting a meeting to discuss implementation of the recommendations of the Ontario government appointed Protected Areas Working Group, which were submitted to the minister in a report in 2021. That request was denied, yet we still maintain that those recommendations, commissioned by this government but only made publicly available through our freedom-of-information request, still represent the best path forward to advancing the expansion of protected and conserved areas in the province for the preservation of nature, biodiversity and low-impact recreation. That report is available on our website.

1420

Our submission to the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act proposed in Bill 26 are grounded in the above context, as well as within the context of the mandate and purpose of the PPCRA. While we are encouraged to see this government take an interest in expanding parks and conservation reserves in the province, we do have concerns about the proposed amendments to add new classes of parks insofar as it may compromise the main purpose and principles of the PPCRA, as follows:

“1. The purpose of this act is to permanently protect a system of provincial parks and conservation reserves that includes ecosystems that are representative all of Ontario’s natural regions, protects provincially significant elements of Ontario’s natural and cultural heritage, maintains biodiversity and provides opportunities for compatible, ecologically sustainable recreation.”

Also from the PPCRA:

“3. The following principles shall guide all aspects of the planning and management of Ontario’s system of provincial parks and conservation reserves:

“1. Maintenance of ecological integrity shall be the first priority and the restoration of ecological integrity shall be considered.

“2. Opportunities for consultation shall be provided.”

In respect to the proposed amendments to introduce two new classes of parks, we are concerned that the new classifications could compromise the intention and integrity of the parks and conservation reserves system, in terms of maintaining ecological integrity and biodiversity as the primary goal.

In particular, for the class of adventure parks, the proposed higher-impact activities that involve altering the natural environment, such as rock climbing, mountain biking, snowmobiling and ATV use, are problematic, as they can have serious short- and long-term impacts on

ecological conservation values. While we understand and support the stated goals of providing more opportunities for outdoor recreation to Ontarians, this should not in any way come at the expense of the primary goal of parks and conservation reserves.

We also have serious objections to the proposed authorization under Bill 26 to allow the Lieutenant Governor in Council to add new classes of provincial parks and specify an objective for such parks by regulation, bypassing the legislative process. This clearly violates the guiding principle of the PPCRA, that opportunities for public consultation shall be provided in all aspects of the planning and management of Ontario’s system of protected parks and conservation reserves.

So that’s the background. I do have very specific recommendations:

(1) As a compromise to maintain both of these efforts to preserve the ecological integrity of the PPCRA, we advance an additional amendment to the text of Bill 26, to preclude the reclassification of current wilderness, nature reserve, natural environment, waterway and recreational class parks. So we ask that the committee recommend the adoption of the following additional amendment in full to the proposed amendments—and I have it written and it’s been passed around, and I’ll read it out loud:

“Subsection 8(1.1) Despite subsection (1) the Lieutenant Governor in Council is prohibited from classifying adventure class parks, urban class parks, a cultural heritage class park or as any class of parks prescribed under subsection 1(1)9 any provincial park that was, as of November 1, 2025, classified as a wilderness class park, a nature reserve class park, a natural environment class park, a waterway class park or a recreational class park.”

Basically, we’re just asking that those parks that are classified for the protection of ecological integrity as the number one priority should not be subject to reclassification, so protecting those values of parks as they are currently.

(2) We recommend the removal of the authorization to the Lieutenant Governor in Council to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specifying objectives for parks, so removing the following sentence in the amendment: “9. Such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations.”

Thank you for the opportunity to put forth these recommendations, and we trust the committee will consider them. As always, the Wilderness Committee is available and eager to be involved in further consultation around expanding protected parks and conservation reserves in the province.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

Now we move to the first round of questioning, and we’ll start with MPP Shaw from the official opposition.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Before I begin, I’m just wondering, Katie, if you have a hard copy of the amendments that you talked about?

Ms. Katie Krelove: I do. They were sent, I think, by email this morning, but I do have hard copies.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay. If you want to pass that to the Clerk—

Ms. Katie Krellove: Sure.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'm going to get to you, but I just want to get a copy of your amendment.

I want to start by addressing Lisa and your organization's work. I want to say that in principle, we support this bill. We have a lot of reservations about the huge latitude and power that the government has given themselves to make changes. You've heard people here say they're concerned that the government will use this to downgrade the classifications of existing provincial parks, especially parks that are ecologically sensitive.

I want to commend your organization for recognizing that. You talked a lot about trail management. I wrote down what you said, which is that you can certainly balance recreation with conservation. I really think that's a good and lofty goal.

Your members spend a lot of time and, probably, money to maintain the areas that you use. This is a government that has continually underfunded or reduced the funding to our existing provincial parks. Is this something that you think your members in their mission would like to see, more active funding, more active management on the part of the government to maintain the areas that you enjoy?

Ms. Lisa Thompson: Currently, if there is a classification change from crown land to parks, we're kicked out. Right now, we are looking to have these protections because we have municipal agreements, we have access to crown land.

But with the obligation of the "30 by 30" target as well as other commitments, once this change happens, our users are losing riding areas, which means we are not able to spend money in those communities, and all of the money that we have put in up to this point is virtually gone. Although other user groups can use it, it's our blood, sweat and tears that get impacted.

With respect to your question, it's that although there's been less money or funding, actually, all the money that we have right now comes from our membership and our members, and we're putting that into the trails. One of the reasons why we are supporting this bill is because we want to be able to have access to the parks, enjoy them and, again, put our money, blood, sweat and tears into the trail network for our members to be able to enjoy.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay. Thank you. That clarifies that.

So that you understand, our concern is not with how you use it or your users, but that it is properly managed and maintained. We were concerned that this government has not shown a very good track record when it comes to protecting species at risk, habitats at risk. Again, the Auditor General shows time and time again that the provincial parks are underfunded, so it makes it really impossible to do that important balancing work between recreation and conservation that sounds like it's a real priority for your organization. So thank you for that clarification.

I'm going to just turn now, if I could with the time that I have, to Katie from the Wilderness Committee. I want to

just share with you that I'm really concerned with this bill, as you have said. Let's start with the fact that they have managed to take a bill that at some point was just an intention, a bill that was trying to help establish an urban park in the Windsor area. They've used this, in my opinion, as an opportunity to put in some serious wiggle room for this government to make changes to our provincial parks that has alarmed many, many people, yourself included.

I also want to say that you talked about context. It's absolutely true that this is in the context of a government that does not seem to understand the fact that our wetlands, our nature is an interconnected system. They seem to think that it's okay to bisect lakes and rivers, particularly when it comes to gutting the conservation authorities' ability to protect our wetlands and to protect these lands.

I'm just going to quickly share with you that last year, at committee, I asked Minister Graydon Smith repeatedly whether they were going to create one conservation authority—change it. I will quote him here. He said, "I think I've been very clear in my answers today that we continue to work with conservation authorities.... At no point have I talked about centralization, so I guess that's your hypothesis of the day"—that was me.

So they said, "No centralization," but they've gone ahead and done that. You can understand my reluctance to believe anything that they say, and you can also understand Ontario's lack of trust when it comes to this government and nature.

1430

So do you want to just speak to the fact that this government doesn't have the moral authority, doesn't have the trust of Ontarians to put forward a bill—

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Point of order. Yes, go ahead, please. Make it short.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: The line of questioning here has nothing to do with Bill 26, so I think we should be keeping to Bill 26 rather than talking about something that is just going into consultation—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Thank you.

Please, MPP Shaw, relate your question to Bill 26.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Bill 26 is opening the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act. This government has done a lot to open up acts like Bill 26.

Ms. Katie Krellove: I think that the "30 by 30" target that we've been encouraging the province to adopt—30% protected lands and waters by 2030—currently Ontario is at 11%—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thirty seconds left.

Ms. Katie Krellove: —so we're far behind most other provinces and territories on this.

The goal of that comes from the UN biodiversity framework. The point of it is to preserve and protect and reverse biodiversity loss, and that should always be the—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up.

Now we move to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: Thank you for your presentations.

I guess, Nina, my question would be—I believe you spoke a little bit around the regulation-making ability of the bill. Do you view that kind of regulation-making—and handing that in the minister's hands and putting more power in the minister's hands—are you concerned about that?

Ms. Nina Deeb: Yes, I'm very concerned about that. I like to partake in every level of government. I speak municipally, provincially, federally, so that takes away my voice.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: What might be some risks there in terms of putting more power in the minister's hands as it pertains to this bill?

Ms. Nina Deeb: No consultations, so the expert then becomes just the minister. The attitude is the minister just knows everything and doesn't need to consult with anyone in the province, and that's not the case.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

Lisa, thank you for your presentation. I'm curious around the tourism aspect of it and in terms of trail riders. How does that look in the province of Ontario?

Ms. Lisa Thompson: So not only do we have a lot—our biggest concentration of riders actually come from the GTA. And we know there's no trails in the GTA, so everyone is travelling rurally. We also bring people in from Quebec, because they really enjoy our trail network, as well as other provinces. We actually have a lot of Americans that come up to enjoy our trail network. So we're bringing those people in, especially to small communities.

We have a couple of our individual clubs that will hold weekend events. I'll give an example of the town of Calabogie. We'll get over 200 riders in on a weekend, boosting that small, rural economy, bringing in tourists that wouldn't necessarily go up to that way. It's something that we promote. It's something that's happening throughout the entire province.

Our organization, the Ontario Federation of Trail Riders, which represents the motorcyclists, we have clubs throughout the entire province. We have clubs all the way up as far as Sudbury, as well as concentrated in the city. On the call with me is one from Kawartha Lakes. We are bringing people in to all sorts of areas.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I think boosting our local and rural and northern economies is really important.

Carolyn, do you have anything else maybe to add around the tourism impact of this bill? Does this bill kind of help satisfy the ability to bring in more tourism to our northern and rural areas?

Ms. Carolyn Richards: I think it definitely does, especially for areas like where I am. I'm in Kawartha Lakes, so I'm close to several provincial parks at the moment and within riding distance of Algonquin Park. We have a lot of small communities that survive on recreation, an example being the town of Kinmount. It survives on snowmobilers and ATVers, and the town itself has actually built recreational parking to be able to welcome the recreational riders

and have restaurants and washrooms that open specifically for that purpose, because that's how they survive in that small town. And it's just one example of many, many small towns in central Ontario.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I have a question—because I'm hearing a little bit of concern around environmental stewardship and motorized trail use—what best practices would either of you recommend for the government to help balance that?

Ms. Lisa Thompson: I can speak for Carolyn as well: We work very closely with whoever the land manager is, whether it be the municipality or the county. We walk together and we try to figure out what's going to be best. Nobody wants to trample over anything that's any sort of endangered species whatsoever.

Carolyn has been working very closely with Haliburton Highlands Land Trust, for example, up in some areas, to work on solutions for issues. Carolyn, would you like to speak a little bit on that as well?

Ms. Carolyn Richards: As an example, we actually have been meeting with the Haliburton Highlands Land Trust because there is an area up here called Milburn Kendrick, and there is a Blanding's turtle habitat in that area. So what we have been working on is the possibility of building a bridge that will take the off-road vehicles out of the wetter areas and reroute them around onto rocky areas to avoid that turtle habitat, and then to do some education pieces with signage and such and, possibly, in the future, some boardwalks so that people can enjoy the area but not disturb the habitat. That's pretty common in our area, for our off-road vehicle organizations—and our clubs, too—to work with any sort of organizations or just the community in general to do some of those protections.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Okay. Thank you.

Chair, how much time is left on that? One minute? I guess maybe in the second—there may be a second round—we'll be able to touch on some other pieces.

That's good. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Thank you.

We move to the government side: MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks to the witnesses for being here today and being part of the process.

My question is for Lisa: I represent a rural riding, and I'm quite familiar with the rural provincial parks. Times are changing. People are changing. Usage is changing. You spoke in favour of adding the off-road vehicles. How do you think these new classifications reflect changing public expectations for outdoor spaces?

Ms. Lisa Thompson: We know that more and more people are staying home. We know that the focus is that we want to have staycations. It's big for us. More people are going out. They're buying these machines. They're selling their places down in the United States. They're not travelling as far. There are a lot of people who used to travel to the States to go to similar-like adventure parks, and now they have the opportunity—or will have the opportunity—to do it here. We know that there is still an increase in purchases of ATVs, side-by-sides, four-by-fours and off-road motorcycles, so being able to have a

place to ride that's legal takes away some of the problems that maybe people might see in the city.

There's just so much opportunity. We have great relationships with a lot of municipalities, but being able to say, "We have a park that you can go to so you can make it a weekend event, like a full staycation. You can camp. You can ride out of your campsite, be able to enjoy your motorized activities, go back to your campsite, do whatever you want to do with your family and really make a weekend out of it." I see the opportunities are endless for these classifications, especially for Ontarians who really want to protect the province that they live in.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: And you said it, right? Obviously, these aren't for right down in the urban areas, but I know, in north Ontario—I've been there on my ATV, and it's a real economic driver. It brings people from everywhere. Traditionally, people just want to get out; they want to ride. They're not out there to ruin the ecosystem. I think it's a win for everyone.

Thank you for that answer.

Ms. Lisa Thompson: I agree. Thank you. And as you said, being able to go out—it's those adventures that families remember. There is this thing going on right now, they ask kids what did they get for Christmas last year. "What did we do last summer?" "Oh, we went ATV and dirt biking." It's those experiences.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Gallagher Murphy. 1440

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: My question is going to be directed to Katie Krellove. Thank you very much to everyone for being here today and your deputations.

Katie, as you are probably aware, our communities are changing. As I noted in the previous session of deputations, our province now has 15 million people; a lot of them are newcomers. A lot of our communities in the GTHA are getting larger and larger, including mine in Newmarket–Aurora, where we do not have a provincial park. We have some trails, but we do not have a park.

So when I think about a community like mine—and I speak to a lot of people who love the outdoors and will travel a distance, or they don't want to travel that far—I think about how our communities are changing and what needs to be done to really help our people in Ontario because they have the right to enjoy the great outdoors that I think a lot of people come to this country for.

All of that being said, my question to you is, how do you think Bill 26 responds to this, the changing needs of our communities?

Ms. Katie Krellove: As I mentioned, I am all for expansion of protected parks, of parks, of conservation reserves; of more protections for people to enjoy nature and recreate in nature. That is not what I'm saying. I'm saying that those new classes of parks should not come at the expense of current parks that are classified as environment parks, that are there to protect biodiversity and protect ecosystem services.

I will point out that we are changing as a society, and part of those changes include climate change and terrifying losses of biodiversity. We continue to lose species to

extinction, and Ontario is now a haven for that. We are also doing that. So those are also changes that we need to confront, and that's in growing protected parks.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Katie Krellove: Again, I have no problem with these new classifications. I would expect that they are new places, so they are additional. And in those places that you talk about that are more close to urban, people are experiencing sprawl, they're experiencing traffic jams and they do need to get out into nature.

When I go to Algonquin Park, I love to hike, I love to canoe and I hope to see a moose. I just don't think if, suddenly, we're creating ATV trails in Algonquin Park, those people who are going there to experience nature and the peace and quiet and potentially wildlife sightings are going to have those opportunities if, all of a sudden, on their hike, they're encountering ATVs. That is what my suggested section 8 additional amendment is meant to prevent.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you. I appreciate that because, obviously, we do want to protect our biodiversity. Just yesterday morning, I saw about 20 wild turkeys crossing the road when I was—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, MPP Gallagher Murphy. Your time is up.

We move to our second round of questioning. We'll start with MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'm going to go at this again, and I'm going to direct my questions to Katie. For those in the back, let me repeat again: We also are not opposed to these classifications for change—not at all. They need to be managed, there needs to be resources behind them and we need to continue to protect our dwindling species. The loss of biodiversity should be shocking to all of us.

Very quickly: I have a grandson; he was in the other room, and I heard him kind of cry or wail, and I went to say, "What's wrong?" I thought he hurt himself. He said, "Nan, will there be nature when I grow up?" That's the kind of anxiety that our grandkids should not be facing. It was shocking to hear him say that, this young guy.

So, yes, we need to take provincial parks as the front line to protect our loss of biodiversity. We are not talking about the fact that these cannot coexist, adventure class parks or urban class parks. What I believe you're saying and what we are saying is that this bill allows the government to reclassify existing parks, and that's what we're worried about—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Shaw, my apologies for interrupting because there is a vote called, so we have to go, all of us, to the vote call, and after that and you can pick up where you left off when you come back.

The committee recessed from 1445 to 1506.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Welcome back, everyone. We will pick up where we left off. MPP Shaw, you have five minutes left from your time.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you, Chair.

What I was saying before we had to go for a vote is that at this committee, what the ministers say, you have to take to heart. But we've had experiences where a minister—for

example, Minister Graydon Smith—said that they wouldn't be consolidating the conservation authorities into one. In fact, in October, they announced that they are. What I was saying is, despite what is promised at committee directly to us, it often turns out not to be the case, so our concern—our healthy dose of cynicism and suspicion—is well founded.

Our concerns with this bill are not the two classifications—with the exception that we're hoping that both of these classifications will be well managed—but that people don't lose out when these reclassifications happen, and that there is clear and transparent consultation, which doesn't also happen when it comes to some of these decisions and changes the government is making to legislation.

Again, to be clear, the concerns that we share, and that many of the deputants here have brought up, are that there is a clause in here that gives the government unfettered latitude to make other classes of parks as prescribed by legislation. This government already has Bill 5 to give them special economic zones, which suspends all the rules and all the laws and regulations in the province, including the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act. Bill 5 allows them to override any of those laws, so you can understand why we're concerned, particularly when it comes to sensitive areas like this.

Where it says, "such other class of parks as may be prescribed by regulations," we also have a concern with that, and where it allows the Lieutenant Governor in Council to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specify objections for such parks—we're concerned with that too because the government has given themselves complete autonomy to make these decisions on behalf of the people of the province of Ontario and behind closed doors.

To Katie from the Wilderness Committee: You proposed amendments to this bill, and they seem like reasoned amendments. I'm hoping the government will consider them. I don't actually, in my eight years here, remember the government ever accepting an amendment that came from opposition, so I'm hoping maybe—hope springs eternal.

In the meantime, if you want to, with the time that's left, just go through these amendments and explain, rather than reading them—you could read them, but also explain exactly what concern they're founded on, because I think these are important amendments that you're proposing.

Ms. Katie Krelove: I think the amendment is fair, and even reading—the proposed amendments in Bill 26 don't seem to contravene. It reads as though the adventure class and urban class are referring to new additional parks that are not currently in existence.

I think, yes, this amendment will just satisfy us in terms of the worry that we'll lose parkland that is currently protected with the priority of ecological health and biodiversity. Public consultation—I will point out that currently in the PPCRA, I would assume that any new parks or new adventure park or new urban park would go through all of the consultation and assessments that any park has to go through.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Katie Krelove: I will point out too that current parks do have the ability to revisit management plans. Every current provincial park has a management plan, and those management plans are meant to be reviewed by the province with extensive public consultation every 20 years. That has not been happening.

Again, just as an example, Algonquin's park management plan was meant to be reviewed in 2018, and we've been asking the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks to fulfill that mandate of reviewing the management plan. I will say that, for example, again, Bon Echo Provincial Park, in 2016, opened up its management plan to allow rock climbing in the park, and I feel comfortable with that because it went through extensive review, environmental assessment, consultation, to be sure that the activity—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up for the official opposition.

We will move to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair, I was wondering—and maybe I'll ask all three of you—if you know of other places in, let's say, Canada or the US, where you see more adventure class, whether it's state parks or provincial parks or even urban class parks as well. So I'm very curious to hear from you folks on that. Go ahead, first, if you know.

Ms. Nina Deeb: The parks that I've seen—not America, actually; Mexico and the Caribbean. I've been to adventure parks there. Xplor in Mexico is exceptionally well done, I think. They save nature, and it's an excellent educational facility. Ziplining—there's a lot there, and it also brought economic opportunities to the area. So I have seen adventure parks done exceptionally well in other countries, yes.

Ms. Lisa Thompson: For me to answer this, I'm actually going to get Carolyn, as well. We attend a conference every year. Carolyn, can you answer on other adventure parks?

Ms. Carolyn Richards: I attend a vehicle conference in the US every year called NOHVCC, and it brings all the state partners together, and the Bureau of Land Management—very similar to our management groups here in Canada.

I can list four provinces that I've personally visited and ridden in these adventure-type parks. California has, I believe, 32 of them. Nevada has them. Utah has them. And, of course, all of us in our industry know that West Virginia is probably the most well-known, because it went from a state of mining resources to when the mines were closed down and they had all this land and no revenue coming in, so the state actually brought in experts and created adventure parks in these mining areas. That is what many of the towns in the state of West Virginia live off of, the tourism from off-road vehicles—as well as hikers and cycling and everything else; they're all multi-use trails, and that's what we promote as well. But West Virginia survives for the most part in the rural areas on these types of adventure parks.

Ms. Lisa Thompson: I don't know if you heard the things she was saying—

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Yes, I think so.

Ms. Lisa Thompson: Okay. Perfect.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Katie, I don't know if you have any comments on this topic, as well. If not, that's okay.

Ms. Katie Krelove: Yes, that sounds great, especially identifying lands that don't necessarily have that ecological significance, that can be repurposed and restored to some extent for those purposes. I mean, I think is the perfect idea for an adventure class park.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Katie, you spoke a little bit around conservation and sustainability. Is what you're suggesting in the recommendations here? Would that work, in terms of how we balance what those needs are? I'm just curious.

Ms. Katie Krelove: I think what we're concerned about is safeguarding from reclassification of current parks without public consultation and without the proper environmental assessments and so on. And yes, the amendments that I've suggested—the one amendment, I think, covers that and was crafted to cover that. As I say, it precludes wilderness class parks, nature reserve class parks, natural environment class parks, waterway class parks and recreational class parks from being reclassified. But as I've said, if you wanted to introduce, say, rock climbing into one of those parks, there are avenues to do that through the management plan that assures the proper consultation and environmental assessment.

Then, in the other case, the main concern—creating new classes of parks without consultation, I think, is problematic through regulation. Are we going to see parks that are mining parks, where mining is somehow compatible with a protected park? That's just a concern.

I think the amendments I'm suggesting respect the PPCRA's purpose and mandate, as I outlined in my submission, which is primarily the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

Lisa, I want to, I guess, pick up a little bit—I'm very interested in the tourism aspect of this. Are the current structures in terms of the roles that your organization and Carolyn's organization play sufficient? Should you be more involved in that piece?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Lisa Thompson: We would like to be, yes. We think that through the Ontario Trails Preservation Alliance, we would like to be in consultations. We have best practices; we'd love to share those.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: We're noticing folks from the USA. They don't have that nearby? Why are they coming here?

Ms. Lisa Thompson: They are coming here because they think that we have the best trails. They like what Ontario has to offer. In Buffalo and some other surrounding states, they're starting to lose their access. We have world-class trails in the province, and they come up every single year. Actually, there's a motorcycle show in January. There's a big group, and they all come up to the

motorcycle show just to buy their membership for the next year. It's great.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. Time is up.

We move to the government side. MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: I've been on trails in the US, Mexico, the Dominican. It's seen as a real economic driver, and I don't think their trails do compare to ours.

This question is for all three. I think I'll have Lisa start. What role do you think legislation like Bill 26 plays in shaping the future of conservation and recreation in Ontario?

Ms. Lisa Thompson: One of the things that we're trying to work on is a provincial trail strategy so that we can have an intricate network of trails throughout the province.

I think that with having trails through these parks, the only opportunity that's going to bring is the ability to have more tourism coming in, as well as more users, where communities can go out and enjoy nature.

One of the things that people don't actually realize is that some people have mobility issues, and being able to be out on motorized vehicles, they can explore more of the parks that they may not have been able to. Whether it be on a side-by-side ATV or even a dirt bike, they can go out, explore nature, enjoy the trails.

Having these adventure parks, having a dedicated space to go, is so important, because then, that way, we can build the trail network. We know the parameters of where it is, but then it's also an experience. The whole family can go, because if maybe only dad and a couple of the kids like to ride, mom can be off doing something else. It becomes a weekend event instead of just a quick go through the trails to connect to something else.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: That accessibility part I've not heard before, but you're right. That does make 100% sense.

Katie?

Ms. Katie Krelove: In terms of legislation, legislation is there to provide oversight, to safeguard. In terms of this, it's to safeguard public land. We look at public land, and we say, "Okay, some of this is going to be for logging. Some of this is going to be for mining. Some of this is going to be open to ATVing or whatever. Some of it is going to be protected for its ecological values," recognizing that that is a value that we share as a society.

1520

It's that value of nature and ecological and conservation values. Whether that's carbon storage, habitat for animals, services like water filtration—those are values. I do think there's a place for all of it in this amazing Ontario that we live in, that people come to—the US, specifically, because they like what we have here. They like the nature here.

What I want to see from this—I'm just concerned that we have a balance. The PPCRA has its stated goal and was created with the acknowledgement of those natural values, those ecosystem values, those biodiversity values. And so, while I support the addition of new types of parks, I don't

want those values to be lost. I don't want that oversight over our public lands to be lost.

I think that the additional amendments that I've put here just safeguard a little bit—to protect those values. And again, I think there's lots of types of parks. I think expansion of protected areas—30% by 2030 is no small feat. It's going to take resources and it's going to take planning and it's going to take public consultation and it's going to take oversight and legislation, and oversight that is in legislation. I just want to ensure that the public good in terms of ecosystem protection is protected.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: It is our intention to have a good balance.

Nina, same question.

Ms. Nina Deeb: I think that there's a lot of opportunity because Ontario is a vast and beautiful province. We have a lot of land, and we can responsibly grow our parks. By doing that, they'd be economic drivers. There are certain areas that we could be adding to what we already have.

As far as what it will do, many areas—I've been all over Ontario. I've spent a lot of time in the provincial parks. I've spent time in Algonquin, in Pinery. I've been to Thunder Bay.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Nina Deeb: I've camped all over the province and I do believe that adventure parks would take families, like myself, and we would get in the car and we would go. So it would be great for both local people and for an economic driver and to attract tourism. I'm very optimistic about this bill.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you for that.

Carolyn, would you like to add anything to that?

Ms. Carolyn Richards: Yes. I just want to add to the accessibility piece. Lisa was very correct as far as accessibility. The average age of the off-road motorcyclist in Ontario right now—we just had the statistics on the weekend in a meeting—is 48 to 60 years old. So we're seeing people who are, in some cases, aging out as far as physical abilities. Eventually they will have to—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up.

That concludes the second panel's time. Thank you very much to all four presenters. Thank you for your input and valuable experience in this field.

ASSOCIATION OF CONSULTING
ENGINEERING COMPANIES—ONTARIO
ONTARIO CONSERVATION
ACCELERATOR
TOWNSHIP OF UXBRIDGE

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Welcome to all of you. I would like to call upon the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies—Ontario. Please state your name and your title. You have seven minutes to deliver your testimony.

Ms. Laura Lambie: Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you very much for the op-

portunity to appear before you today. My name is Laura Lambie. I'm the director of government and stakeholder relations at the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies—Ontario.

Celebrating 50 years in 2025, our association represents over 140 Ontario engineering firms operating across this province. Our members provide professional engineering services that shape the infrastructure that Ontarians rely on every day, including the design and delivery of infrastructure that supports public access to natural spaces. Our members are leaders in both climate adaptation and mitigation, prioritizing designs that reduce risk from extreme weather, protect biodiversity and lower long-term environmental impact.

In our climate change position statement, issued through our sustainability and climate change network—this helps guide our profession's role in stewarding natural systems by working with government, Indigenous rights holders and advising public agencies. These principles align closely with the intent of Bill 26 to expand access to nature while protecting what makes it valuable. And through our sustainability and climate change network, we continue to lead these conversations on how the built environment and ecosystems can and must coexist.

We are pleased to support this bill and its goals. Ontario's growing and diversifying population needs a more inclusive and flexible park system, one that embeds ecological protection with modern forms of recreation and ensures access for residents in urban areas.

The introduction of urban and adventure class parks is both timely and forward-looking. Urban class parks in particular respond to a real gap in many cities and rapidly developing communities where green space is increasingly outpaced by growth. These parks can improve quality of life, promote public health and provide equitable access to nature for residents who may not have the means to travel to more remote areas.

Adventure class acknowledges the shift in how Ontarians experience the outdoors. Since the pandemic, park usage has surged and, at the same time, domestic tourism has grown with more Ontarians vacationing closer to home. This adds pressure to existing parks and their systems and highlights the need to invest in thoughtfully designed and sustainable recreation areas. We appreciate that this bill provides a framework to accomplish that and helps clarify the purpose of these new park classes. Defined objectives help ensure infrastructure aligns with long-term stewardship goals. And for our sector, that clarity enables us to deliver targeted, effective solutions that support Ontario's evolving needs.

Our contributions can take many forms, including designing resilient and inclusive infrastructure. From stormwater systems to accessible trail networks, engineers help ensure parks are safe and sustainable for all users.

As licensed professionals, we are required to uphold the highest standards of public safety, which is especially important in spaces with high public use.

Integrating nature with infrastructure, whether it's boardwalk in a wetland or permeable trails through forests,

we create nature-based solutions that preserve environmental integrity.

Delivering climate-resilient and low-impact designs, we help future-proof parks against erosion, flooding and other climate stresses while minimizing ecological disruption.

Improving accessibility through our work helps ensure park infrastructure serves families, seniors and people with physical disabilities, so no one is left behind.

1530

Lastly, in supporting local economic and tourism benefits, parks can be a catalyst for regional tourism, jobs and health. Engineers are part of that economic engine, helping communities realize long-term values.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak today. ACEC–Ontario and its members are committed to working together as a true partner in delivering infrastructure that meets today’s needs and tomorrow’s challenges.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): I call upon the Ontario Conservation Accelerator to deliver their testimony. You have seven minutes. Please identify yourself.

Mr. Mike Hendren: It’s Mike Hendren, executive director. Great comments—I’m going to give you my card.

To the Chair and members: It’s great to be here. Thanks for being invited. I’m the executive director of the Ontario Conservation Accelerator. We’re a private foundation, and we’re also a land trust that owns and manages land. We give out money to different groups, including municipalities. We’re a partner and funder to a project with the town of Uxbridge. I’m not looking for any thanks today, but maybe tomorrow.

We have about 130 projects. The base budget set for the next year of funds will be distributing around the \$10-million range. We have a small, mighty team. I personally am a registered urban and regional planner in the province. I’m on the board of the Ontario land trust and I’m on several other charity boards that are in this space. I was the chair of a kids’ forest school in Peterborough until recently.

I have three young boys, and I live in urban Peterborough. We spend as much time as possible in parks and protected areas, mainly to burn energy, but also because we enjoy it. I can tell you first-hand how wonderful these spaces are and how important they are, but also how stretched some of these spaces are and how much more we need.

I’m also bringing regards today on behalf of one of my key partners and friends, Peter Kendall, who’s executive director of the Schad Foundation. He had a charity board that he chairs today, a previous engagement, so he couldn’t make it, but together we had the following comments that we wanted to share.

I would say first of all, and kind of the main headline for us, is that for all the natural beauty and diversity that Ontario has, we simply don’t have enough places for citizens and for visitors to access. In particular, we do not have enough near-access nature in urban areas where people live, predominantly where Ontarians live and also where our visitors are coming. Ontario Parks just had its

busiest season in history and is expecting to have an even busier season in 2026. If any of you have tried getting a campsite in recent years, you can attest to that, and certainly if you try to get into any of these parks anywhere near the GTA, where most Ontarians live.

Frankly, I just have to say we are delighted by this bill. It’s great to see the government, through the initiative of MPP Dowie and other members, to look at how to diversify and expand the Ontario parks and protected areas system and provide more opportunities for near-urban nature. A few things that I think are not super well recognized is that Ontario is leading the country in the creation of parks and protected areas in recent years.

A few examples: the expanding Ontario’s protected area initiative, which recently announced the first two batches of that: 70 sites over 56,000 acres of lands that were committed for conservation and parks; and the ongoing establishment of two new provincial parks, including the Uxbridge urban.

I’ve been delighted to serve as chair of the urban parks working group whose goal is to identify resources and partners towards the expansion establishments of new urban parks and urban park spaces.

I would also say that we’re pleased to be working with this government as we acquire private lands through donations and acquisitions using private money that we’re actually going to be putting into the Ontario Parks system. We’ve figured out some methods to accelerate that process. I’m also pleased to say that we’re working with Scouts Canada, as an example, on a package of 25 parcels of lands, many of which are abutting provincial parks, that will be great additions to the conservation parks mosaic, some of which will be moved into the parks system.

Really, the long and short is we think that there’s a lot of positive in this bill from what we understand. We’re looking forward to working with the government and want to congratulate MPP Dowie for his initiative on this bill. I also just want to express our commitment and our private funding commitment to work with this government, communities, First Nations, other stakeholders—in particular, the philanthropic community—to bring forward and deliver support for expanding parks and protected areas in Ontario.

Thanks again for your interest and for having me here on behalf of all Ontarians.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Now it’s the city of Uxbridge’s turn. Please identify yourself. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Dave Barton: It’s an absolute pleasure to be here. I’m the mayor of the township of Uxbridge. We’re a small community of 22,600 people. We have hundreds of kilometres of trails. I’m also the chair of Conservation Ontario. I’m the vice-chair of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. I’ve sat on both the LSRCA and CLOCA. So this is an important space to be in.

The reason I ran for office was because of the trail systems. I mountain bike. I hike. This is extremely important to me and my community, so, again, it’s a pleasure to be here and to speak on behalf of this. The township of

Uxbridge, we're known as the trail capital of Canada, so we encourage you to come and visit.

I was extremely involved in the creation of the Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park, and we're still building that out. When it first began, under the leadership of the Premier and Minister Bethlenfalvy and a number of others, it started with 1,350 acres. We have since added a couple hundred acres from Uxbridge that the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority is still moving over, 3,800 additional acres, and then the region of Durham has voted to pass over all the Durham forest lands as well. So this is going to be a huge park that will make a significant difference to my community.

This is why this bill is so important: From a tourism perspective, from a lifestyle perspective, the reason people come and move to a place like Uxbridge is for the trails, for mountain biking and hiking and taking their dogs for walks. My concern about the rigidity of the PPCRA is that it won't allow competitive mountain bike trails where our future Olympians and current Olympians train. It won't necessarily allow the flexibility that we need to create those trail systems. All of our trails were created by volunteers. They cut the trails; they leaf-blow the trails. When the tornado ripped through my community and there were hundreds of trees down, for the most part, my volunteers were the ones that cleared them.

Just a little fun story—I don't know if I have time, but I'll try it: We sent a crew into our municipal park that's a couple hundred acres to go clear out all the trails, and our Scouts had done it two days before and had done three days of work that we were unaware of. So our volunteers are why these trails are amazing. They take ownership.

We need to make sure, MPP Dowie, when you create your urban and adventure classes, that you have flexibility to allow event promoters and volunteer groups—that the school boards can run their cross-country events in these places. Because if you don't, all the advocating that I made to transfer these lands over to the provincial park will make it very difficult for me to stay in my community. We need to make sure that it is easy to do business with Ontario Parks and that it's flexible enough to do things like create trails and have volunteers do work. That's something critically important.

I also want to talk about economic development. I'm friends with a guy named Adam Ruppel. He started the 24 Hours of Summer Solstice 28 years ago. It's a mountain bike race. He runs it at Albion Hills, which is a TRCA property. Every year, there's about 2,500 participants. Over those years, it's had an economic impact of about \$50 million. Without the flexibility to allow events to easily work with Ontario Parks to make these things happen, that type of event wouldn't happen.

We need more flexibility to allow the people that live within 20 minutes of the Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park—we need more flexibility to let that happen. As different activities change and grow, we need to make sure that there's flexibility to adapt to that, and it can't take 10 years to do \$15 million worth of studies. We need to have the flexibility to make that happen. As you're creating espe-

cially the urban class—because I think that's going to be the one for Uxbridge—please keep that in mind.

I'm open to questions. Let me make sure I didn't miss anything—I think that covers most of it, but I'm wide open to questions.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, all three of you.

Now, we will start with the first round of questioning. We will start with MPP Shaw from the official opposition. The floor is yours.

1540

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you for being here, all three of you, today.

I'm just going to explain where I'm coming from with the questions that I have today. I absolutely, in principle, support the idea of expanding provincial parks—I'm a huge fan of provincial parks, myself—but this is where my concerns are founded. For example, recently, this government has, really, repealed the Endangered Species Act. They've redefined habitats; it's a very narrow definition of habitat. They've removed the goal of recovery for species at risk. They put in a law that will allow the government to overrule any scientific reports or classification. And, in fact, they passed regulations—

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Chair, point of order?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Point of order, MPP Cuzzetto—make it short, please.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: No problem; I will, Chair.

Let's concentrate on Bill 26 today because this bill is very important to the communities from what we've been hearing today. So I figure we should concentrate on the bill, not on past bills or whatever else—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Thank you very much, MPP Cuzzetto.

MPP Shaw, go ahead, please. Focus on Bill 26.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: That is what the government has done, in the context of provincial parks that are the front line when it comes to preserving the habitat and species at risk.

Ontario is not doing very well when it comes to protecting biodiversity loss. In fact, we are losing more biodiversity than we are conserving in this province. We are continuing to lose wetlands at an increased rate, from 615 hectares a year to now 1,800 hectares a year. And the species at risk in Ontario have increased to a phenomenal number because of loss of habitat.

Again, let me say to you, I'm a big fan of the expansion of provincial parks. I'm concerned that this bill does not preclude reclassifying existing provincial parks or downgrading the classification of existing parks. So while I agree with everything that you said about urban parks and the importance of those, and adventure class parks and the importance of those, my question—and I'm going to start with you, if you don't mind, Your Worship: Would you be comfortable with this bill being used to degrade and downgrade current classifications of provincial park protections?

Mr. Dave Barton: Because I'm mayor of Uxbridge, I'm laser-focused on my 22,600 residents. That's what I'm

here to talk about. I'm here to make sure that the people in my community and the tourists have the flexibility to enjoy our parks.

What I've seen while we've been creating this park is studies and red tape. It takes a long time to do anything right now. Even to move protected lands within the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and move them into the PPCRA takes hundreds of thousands of dollars and years. We need to find some way to protect the environment and also get—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes, that's my point: We need to do both of those things. My concern is that in this bill—and it's the concern of pretty much every deputant previous to you—the language is too vague. Amendments have been moved that would make sure that this government adds language that precludes the devaluing of the protection level of existing provincial parks.

For example, in this bill, there's a clause that says, "Such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations." We know that when it comes to regulation, there's no clear input from Indigenous communities, from anybody that's concerned, like your constituents, who would be concerned about the use of the parks. And it gives the power to—it says the Lieutenant Governor in Council, which is cabinet—"to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specifying objectives for such parks."

This is very vague language and gives the government a lot of latitude when it comes to a bill that originated with the need to develop urban class parks and adventure class parks.

I guess my question now would be to you, Mr. Hendren—it's the same question—would you be comfortable if this bill was used to downgrade the protection and the classification of existing provincial parks like Algonquin Park, like Wasaga Beach?

Mr. Mike Hendren: Honestly, I haven't looked into the specifics of the bill and I'm not really qualified to discuss that. I would say my interest is in the fact that there's expanded parks in Ontario, urban and otherwise, and bringing philanthropic dollars to the table for that. That's really where I come from. So you may want to ask somebody else.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: But you did say you were in support of the legislation, and I'm just reading from the legislation. It's real simple.

Mr. Mike Hendren: Yes, from what I've seen, I think it has a positive goal, and I see it as really only a net positive to the whole system.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'll follow up. I'll ask this really quickly, but I want to ask the association of consulting engineers. Laura, if I could ask you: You talked a lot about climate change and resiliency. My question in the short time we have is—and I'll get back to it in the second round—do you see a role for conservation authorities and conservation areas and provincial parks in supporting your

goal, as you stated, of developing climate-resilient communities and areas in the province?

Ms. Laura Lambie: With respect to this bill specifically, I can speak to the contributions that our members could make to enabling once those details are ironed out down the road.

Conservation authorities have been one particular group and agency that members work with, but with respect to my contributions to the comments on the bill, I can say with certainty that our members do have that as a top priority and would be able to contribute to those goals.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The time is up.

We move to the third party. MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you all for coming in today, taking the time out of your busy schedule and enlightening us on your thoughts on this bill—an interesting group, you are.

I'll start with the mayor of Uxbridge, Your Worship, Mr. Barton. My father was mayor of a town of 20,000 back in the day—

Mr. Dave Barton: Oh, yeah? Which one?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Collingwood—when I said I would never go into politics.

Thank you for telling us about your park; I'd like to hear more about that and also your role as chair of the conservation authority. But first of all, you just mentioned about the value of volunteers in our green spaces, and I know that. The Toronto Nature Stewards in Toronto do an amazing job. They do have a little bit of difficulty sometimes trying to remove invasive species—certain invasive species they're not allowed to remove. The city wants to do that kind of thing, but the city doesn't have the people power to do that or the funding sometimes. So I'm with you on the value of volunteers in helping be stewards of our land.

Do you feel that this bill does not cover that aspect, or are you looking for an amendment, or do you feel it does?

Mr. Dave Barton: Again, excellent question. I understand my politics very, very well. I don't know enough about this bill on exactly how flexible it is from a volunteer perspective. I wanted to make sure that everyone in in this room knew how critically important it is, as we're adding lands to our park, that there's enough flexibility to include my residents, who have so much passion.

The Durham Mountain Biking Association do huge amounts of work. They're leaf-blowing constantly in the winter, we're grooming fat bike trails—that type of thing. We just need to make sure that the entire team from the province of Ontario knows how to make sure that they include that with any amendments for the urban classes of parks.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Right, especially—we do want to leave our leaves on the ground for biodiversity at times, when we can.

Mr. Dave Barton: At times.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okey-doke. So this new park of yours that you're looking for—you feel it's

going to be kind of an economic boon to your town with tourism, or more tourism, because of the size?

Mr. Dave Barton: Yes. So, again, the add is the 1,350 acres, but we're also looking to transition more and more private lands, including aggregate pits that have been rehabilitated. So we're also trying to add over a thousand acres of those pits as well.

1550

Yes, we are steps from millions of people, and we want to be the playground of the GTA. We want to be the place where people come for a hike or a mountain bike ride or treetop trekking or a number of other types of activities or events that they can do in my community. We're welcoming those with open arms.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: All right. I think a field trip is in order for this committee.

Mr. Dave Barton: No problem.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you.

The Ontario Conservation Accelerator: Mike, thanks for coming. I didn't know about your group so I'm eager to learn about it—what kind of projects you've funded in the past and that kind of thing, I guess. Tell me a little bit about your accelerator.

Mr. Mike Hendren: I'm very happy to. We're a private charity and we work with a number of other foundations, and we support a number of land trusts. We work with a few municipalities—really anything that is an expansion of conservation or parks or protected areas. We have a wide range of projects all across Ontario.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Can you give me an example of one or two that you're proud of?

Mr. Mike Hendren: There was a neat project in Renfrew—I forget what they ended up calling it—the Bonnechere River park. It was actually something that was brought to us by a former MPP, and in the end it was a great fit as a local municipally run park. The original idea was that it would be a provincial park, so I think there are different scenarios that can play out from this initiative, and it will inspire others. I think that's the great thing. It doesn't all have to fall on the government to expand and create these spaces; we can have municipalities that can take a role. In fact, sometimes private groups can be created—a new land trust. I think there are now 38 land trusts in Ontario of all different sizes.

We will provide, usually, smaller matching funds and provide some extra expertise in assembling those lands with a goal of, basically, parks and conservation.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: You have kids you said, and you also ran a forest school, which sounds—is that what you said?

Mr. Mike Hendren: Chair of the board, yes.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'm just wondering what kind of activities those kids at the school and your own kids would be keen to do in a park with this new bill especially.

Mr. Mike Hendren: Well, so far because my kids are all under seven, there are fairly positive and noble things they like to do in the park. I have my own concerns about

what the future could look like. But, I mean, just passive recreation—building forts, running through trails, riding their bikes, things like this—all things that are largely permissible in most parks.

My favourite colour is blue too, if you're wondering. I don't know if there's anything else you want to know about me.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: No. Are you concerned about the greater usage of the park and then what kind of state the parks will be left in and any ideas—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Hold that thought.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We now move to the government side. MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: I just want to say thank you to Laura, Mike and Dave for your excellent presentations. Your organizations all do different work, but you all have the same passion for making the parks a better place to be, with more opportunity for people to use the parks in the future.

How do you see Bill 26 helping Ontario adapt to a changing environment and recreational needs? It's to all three of you.

Mr. Dave Barton: Why don't we go with Mike first?

Mr. Mike Hendren: It's on the tip of my tongue, actually, because it relates to the last question I was asked.

I think the reality is that most parks and protected areas, especially the ones that don't have controlled access like some of the more formal open provincial parks, are pretty stretched—I would say overrun is probably a term I could use for some. And I go to all different types of sites.

Really that's where our focus is, in encouraging creating more. The government owns some lands that could be a fit. The government can also work with other partners like municipalities and private groups. I think there's a lot of opportunity to set the stage and set the vision, but I think the reality is there's just not enough. We saw it during COVID with people having barbecues in the parking lots of different sites and trying to get a reservation at a provincial park or even conservation authority lands or even lands owned by volunteer groups like land trusts.

In the city that I live in—where, interestingly, Ontario Parks's head office is—we're surrounded by natural areas, but it's a very poor city, and there's a lot of people who don't have a car. So we have one big park in the middle of the city and it is overrun with dog walkers and bikes. It's still a lovely place called Jackson Park, but I just wish that we'd had the foresight a few decades ago to expand it because there are a lot of lands around that have ended up being developed and may have been a great fit. We just need to do more collectively. I think that's really my view.

MPP Paul Vickers: Laura, would you like to—

Ms. Laura Lambie: Yes. I would just echo those comments as well. Me, personally, I'm an avid backcountry camper in Algonquin. I go every year. Especially in the last few years in particular, I've noticed a huge influx of folks across the province coming into not just Algonquin, but a number of different parks across the province. Especially

with the increased interest in vacationing domestically, in particular in the last year, a lot of folks are looking for new opportunities to spend time in Ontario, and I think that's something that is well placed for our industry to support, in terms of enabling sustainable outcomes as we expand park access for everyone across the province.

MPP Paul Vickers: It's almost like an urgency to expand the park system.

Ms. Laura Lambie: Yes, it's definitely something that would help sooner rather than later, for sure.

Mr. Dave Barton: I think it's critically important for flexibility, especially as we're adding new lands to groups like Mike's. We have snowmobile trails and other trails that go through areas right now, and a lot of those areas are getting closed. As we're creating new connections, one of my goals is to create a small little park northeast of Uxbridge to connect Uxbridge into Peterborough and Haliburton on an old rail corridor. If we made it a typical provincial park right now, we would lose our snowmobile trail. We would lose access to the people that currently use it and maintain it.

So we have to find ways to expand, be flexible with how we create these things, but still make sure that if you experience nature one way or another, we can accommodate it all. Certainly, the areas we just took in from the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, we don't want dirt bikes in there. We've been fighting that for decades. But in other areas, it will be perfect for that.

Let's make sure that we have enough flexibility in the legislation to create perfect areas for people training for an ultramarathon, perfect areas for people that want to do treetop trekking or anything flexible like that and also keep the existing areas for the snowmobilers because the economic impact of losing those groups would be very detrimental to many communities—not necessarily mine, but a bunch to the north.

MPP Paul Vickers: It's almost like not everybody's the same. Some people like to walk. Some people like to snowmobile. It's trying to find a balance of everything and then be able to make sure that everybody can have their spot in our parks in Ontario, I think, is the important part. I agree with you completely, Dave, so I appreciate your comments.

Mr. Dave Barton: Thank you so much.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Gallagher Murphy.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, Chair, and through you, to Your Worship—

Mr. Dave Barton: We've talked about this.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Mayor Barton, thank you very much for your deputation. It's very interesting that you're into mountain biking, so I'm going to lead off on that. You're right. You made comments about how people can train for some of these great sports: national, international and worldwide sports. When I think of an individual from my constituency in Newmarket you may have heard about—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: He wrote a book called *Defy the Odds*, Andrew Kooger. He was a mountain

biker. While training, he had a devastating accident, mountain biking, and he became paralyzed. He is now continuing because he wants to compete still, but with the biking, now, you do with your hands. That's the big focus.

My question to you—now, if we don't get to finish it, let's come around to it, because this is important, especially for Andrew. If you're listening, Andrew, I'm looking out for you. How can you see this park helping somebody like Andrew train?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. Unfortunately, the time is up. Mayor, you'll have to pick it up on the second round.

Now we go to the second round with MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you, Chair. I have no further questions.

1600

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Thank you.

We'll move to the third party. MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Oh, great. Can I take my colleague's time?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): No, you cannot—wishful thinking.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I just thought I'd try.

The number one reason I got back into this nutty world of politics is the climate emergency. I'm very, very worried about that. Not a lot of climate action is being done right now with this government, unfortunately, try as I may to convince them.

So I love this organization of yours, Laura. That you are building resilient infrastructure and talking about nature-based solutions is just music to my ears. I'm just wondering how much faith you have with this government and this bill. Don't get me wrong; it's from my favourite member of provincial Parliament on the other side, Mr. Dowie—

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Favourite? Holy jeez, I thought I was.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That's in the public domain, that he's my favourite.

Recently, we're having the destruction of the conservation authorities, and somehow they're going to be amalgamated into seven entities and staff will be redeployed—well, we'll wait and see. We have, as my colleague mentioned, the killing of the Endangered Species Act, and now we have this.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Point of order.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: It leads off with resilient infrastructure—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP McMahon, please.

Point of order: Go ahead, MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Chair. We're concentrating on Bill 26, not previous bills or bills that are going to come in the future. Let's concentrate on this bill and what it's going to do for the community.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much.

MPP McMahon, please focus on Bill 26.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. Thank you so much.

The theme is resiliency. I'm a little concerned with some past bills and whatnot with this government, but quite hopeful, because I know the mover of this bill. Do you feel that green spaces will still remain protected, and that you can still do a lot of work with nature-based solutions and building resilient infrastructure with this bill?

Ms. Laura Lambie: Thank you for the question. There's certainly lots of opportunity to implement nature-based solutions in particular through Bill 26. Our industry is certainly focused on, if this bill passes, being able to support enabling resilient nature-based solutions.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'm not fully aware of your organization, so what are your membership numbers or numbers of companies that are involved with your association, approximately?

Ms. Laura Lambie: We work with just over 140 consulting engineering companies across the province, and they employ just over, I believe, 30,000 folks across the province.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Great. And a project that you're most proud of?

Ms. Laura Lambie: From our members?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Yes.

Ms. Laura Lambie: I can't pick one in particular.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That's a good problem.

Ms. Laura Lambie: Yes. There are several quite significant projects that have occurred and are certainly ongoing that we're proud of.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Awesome.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Two minutes and 44 seconds.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. We're going to do rapid fire. Maybe it's just one question.

If you could give us one piece of advice as we consider this bill. We'll start with Mr. Uxbridge.

Mr. Dave Barton: The one piece of advice that I talked about is flexibility. I know that's tough from a government perspective, but make sure when we're adding lands to these parks that we can do things quickly, because if you ask volunteers to wait for four years to be able to add a new trail, it's never going to happen. They're going to go somewhere else. It's critically important to the success of my community.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: All right. Thanks very much.

Over to Mike.

Mr. Mike Hendren: I just think this is the kind of bill we want to support. To me, it's probably across all parties. It's a good thing for communities. It brings out all kinds of partners, and I think it leverages government dollars very well, as we've seen in the Uxbridge example and others. This is the kind of thing that the private sector loves to support both in-kind or through private cash and philanthropy, and I think it brings out volunteers—that's been referenced. So it's a really good value-for-money type of initiative and so should really be a win all around.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much.

Laura?

Ms. Laura Lambie: I would say that this is a really great first step in the process to be able to expand access to parks for folks across Ontario, and it's great to see so much support for it as well. Again, as it's the first step in this process, we're very much looking forward to working together as well.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you. That's good.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You're good? Okay. Thank you.

We move to the government side: MPP Gallagher Murphy.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: I would like to come back, Chair, to my last question, because it has great significance for a constituent of mine. If you haven't read his book, read his book, *Defy the Odds*—great mountain biker. He'd go north of us—I forget exactly where it happened, his accident, but he was mountain biking when it happened. But it just shows his resilience because he wants to continue training, and that's what he's doing.

My question to you is—and it's actually called an adaptive bike, that they can brake with their hands and manoeuvre with their hands. Do you see something like that potentially for somebody using an adaptive bike in the urban park that's being built, obviously—or being dedicated, let's say—in your township? How do you see something like that happening or helping a constituent in that case?

Mr. Dave Barton: I love the question. Thank you so much.

I talked about the 24 Hours of Summer Solstice. They have a division in that that your friend probably competes in. Depending on people's abilities, they can use a hand crank or a hand crank with e-assist. Every bit of accessibility fits.

I'll also talk about myself. My nephew is probably—at least was when he was competing—the top 80th in the world; he went to world cups. If I wanted to ride with my nephew, I would use my e-assist mountain bike to make sure I could keep up because it was the only way to actually be with him and not die. But with that, that wouldn't be permitted in a provincial park. I'd be breaking the rules as mayor to use that bike in a provincial park.

Again, that's the whole flexibility piece because sometimes accessibility is your friend to be able to compete; other times it's me keeping up to my 17-year-old daughter so I can make sure she's still training. It's using different technology for different things across all different sports.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Good response. Thank you.

A follow-up question for you as well: How might these new park classifications help fill a gap in Ontario's current park system?

Mr. Dave Barton: I think as we're adding new lands—and I'll use my lands as an example. If we convert an existing gravel pit that's been rehabbed as part of this rehab plan and have some more flexibility, it won't just be

500 more acres of something that already exists. We could purpose-build that as we transition out of aggregate and create something really special that we don't have yet. It's not the same as the other 4,000 acres. We could make something really unique that might be a perfect place for triathletes to train in, or things we haven't even thought of.

But if we're so stringent with what a park is—the new urban class is not a park ranger and a gate. It's the place where you might have a barbecue one day with your family. It might be a place where a new Canadian from a different part of the world has an activity that they did as a young person back at the place they grew up.

I think it's making sure that the new areas we create can be flexible as we learn more.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: That's great.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to thank each of you for being here today. I think you've provided some fascinating perspectives, all unique to your worlds, but they've been incredible.

1610

I know over the last, I'll call it, two decades that I've had a professional career, I've certainly seen public expectation change, and particularly from the time I started in elected office to now, the public expectations have definitely changed. So I'm hoping that you each might be able to respond to how you see these new classifications reflecting a changing public expectation for their outdoor spaces.

Perhaps we'll start with you, Mayor Barton.

Mr. Dave Barton: Oh, thanks. I think it depends on the area. I think what we need are places where all Canadians or visitors to Canada can enjoy. That could be different accessibility requirements; it could be different lifestyles. Now that we're getting more people living in small places, little condos, we need places where you can take a bus, you can take a train right into wilderness and maybe experience the northern lights for the very first time and things like that.

Anyway, I'll let my colleagues jump in. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Mike Hendren: I think, obviously, the affordability issue is a big one, and people are increasingly living in urban spaces, and so people need access to green space or natural areas, urban parks, whatever you want to call it, near where they live, increasing this where people live, and they can't afford a cottage or even the travel to more remote places. I know there's provincial parks in northern Ontario that I think are much easier to get into, but even so I'm having trouble up there. It's not always super easy. So this is all about making places available to where people live.

Ms. Laura Lambie: And I would say it's definitely helpful in improving accessibility to outdoor spaces in those activities as well, whether it be proximity to large urban areas like in the GTA or just generally providing more opportunities across Ontario to be able to—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up. That concludes our third panel of the day. Thank you very much for your valuable input.

We'll take a few seconds to set up the final panel of the day. Thank you very much.

THE FRIENDS OF OJIBWAY PRAIRIE

CITY OF WINDSOR

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Committee members, please take your seats.

I see Mike Fisher from the Friends of Ojibway Prairie is here. Our second witness, the city of Windsor, will be joining us through Zoom.

We will start with Mike Fisher. Please identify yourself and your title, and you have seven minutes.

Mr. Mike Fisher: Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding Bill 26. My name is Mike Fisher, and I'm here as president of the Friends of Ojibway Prairie.

The Friends of Ojibway Prairie is a volunteer-run charitable organization that supports the Ojibway Prairie Complex in Windsor, Ontario. We work closely with the city of Windsor's parks department to partner on a variety of initiatives, such as family education programming, nature hikes, interpretive signage construction, restoration projects and much more.

The Ojibway Prairie Complex is a special place where visitors have the wonderful opportunity to engage in our natural heritage by exploring the rare tallgrass prairie and oak savannah ecosystems. Nowhere in Ontario will you find a greater density of biodiversity than Ojibway and the surrounding natural areas. This was well reflected in the recently achieved key biodiversity area designation that recognized the Ojibway Prairie Complex and greater parks ecosystem in Windsor and LaSalle as among the most important sites for biodiversity in Canada. The approximately 100,000 visitors to the Ojibway Nature Centre and nearby trails every year are treated to a variety of natural wonders, from the beautiful dense blazing star to the eastern fox snake to our official city bird, the tufted titmouse.

The Ojibway Prairie Complex has also received significant national attention as the proposed location for Canada's second national urban park. Bill C-248 sought to establish an Ojibway national urban park through the Canada National Parks Act and was at the committee stage of the Senate before an election ended the bill. Parks Canada continues their work to establish our national urban park after receiving \$36.1 million in establishment funding in the 2024 federal budget. Our community is very passionate about biodiversity and access to nature in urban areas and we understand the importance of strong legislation that provides long-term protection for our treasured parks.

Looking outward across southern Ontario, the Carolinian forest zone spanning from Toronto to Windsor is a very important region. The Carolinian zone is one of the most

biodiverse locations in Canada and is home to more than 70 species of native trees—the most of any forest region in the country. It is also home to 2,200 plant species, 400 bird species and more than half of Canada's species at risk.

However, the Carolinian zone is also the most urbanized region of the country, supporting more than 25% of Canada's population. Since colonization, the Carolinian zone has lost more than 90% of its original natural areas. These facts are well discussed in the current issue of Canadian Geographic magazine in a piece titled *The Unravelling Quilt* by Michela Rosano that highlights efforts to protect what remains of the Carolinian forest in Ontario. Further research from Dr. Tara Martin at the University of British Columbia indicates that 130 at-risk species in the Lake Simcoe-Rideau region face local extinction by 2050 if no action is taken.

It is the Friends of Ojibway Prairie's belief that Bill 26 presents a well-positioned opportunity to create harmony in this juxtaposition by establishing a new classification for urban parks that can be used to help grow the province's protected areas footprint and ensure that Ontarians have access to enjoy and appreciate our rich biodiversity for generations to come.

The benefits of having access to nature have been well documented through strong research. Spending time in natural areas is great for physical, mental and social well-being. Getting out into the great outdoors helps get those extra steps in while reducing stress, increasing your sleep quality and providing opportunity for meaningful community interactions.

With regard to the new classification for urban parks, we're encouraged by the sponsor's vision of growing the Ontario Parks inventory through the creation of new parks. These new adventure parks could be created in locations that may have great value as green spaces and for recreation purposes but would be overlooked under the current classifications.

We also see potential in a well-managed system of adventure parks that can be established with consideration for moving higher-impact forms of recreation away from areas that are highly ecologically sensitive and into areas that provide opportunity to have fun outdoors without impacting ecological integrity.

If we can expand Ontario's natural areas through the creation of new adventure parks while carefully maintaining existing and new parks falling under the current classifications, we are hopeful for an implementation that could both maintain biodiversity and provide new opportunities to appreciate nature through Ontario's provincial parks.

1620

Based on our review of Bill 26, we'd like to share a few points of comment and recommendations for implementation.

First, we are pleased that the new parks classifications under Bill 26 maintain the existing language falling under the provincial parks and nature reserves act. This includes section 2(1) and section 3, paragraph 1, that lay out the objectives and planning and management principles that

apply to provincial parks. These include the prioritization of ecological integrity and the objective to provide opportunities to increase knowledge and appreciation for natural heritage. It is crucial that as new classifications of park are implemented, ecological integrity is maintained while identifying appropriate recreation opportunities to get people out enjoying nature.

Second, we are eager to see these new classes of parks creating opportunities for Ontario Parks to build on their work in engaging and partnering with Indigenous peoples in the support of the province's natural areas.

Third, we would like to see the addition of future classes of park done with careful thought and opportunity for healthy discussion and public feedback to ensure the right balance for Ontario's parks. The method that is used should provide these opportunities.

Finally, we are supportive of seeing the new urban parks and adventure class parks used to expand Ontario Parks's inventory of natural areas. The adventure class parks should be created and managed in a very thoughtful way that gets people out enjoying nature while supporting the maintenance of ecological integrity. Higher-impact recreation activities should remain restricted in current parks while carefully pursuing locations that are more appropriate and that would not be considered under the current park classifications.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Mike Fisher: The Friends of Ojibway Prairie are pleased to see the introduction of Bill 26 and particularly look forward to the creation of an inventory of urban parks established with the protections and permanency of the provincial parks and nature reserves act.

Thank you, Chair and committee members, for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have during the question period.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

Now I would like to give the floor to His Worship the mayor of the city of Windsor. Please identify yourself, and you have seven minutes.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm Drew Dilkens, mayor of the city of Windsor. I'm really happy to appear here in support of Bill 26 and what's being proposed. Like my friend Mr. Fisher before me, we certainly, as a city, support what is being proposed in this act.

I would just say that—telling a bit of a story—it was the 1950s, before I was even born, that the city of Windsor and the council of the day acquired the Ojibway prairie lands, before it was even within the boundaries of today's city of Windsor. For a long, long time, for many decades, people in our region have understood and appreciated the importance of this land. Now it's really about bringing it together and creating more harmony, and I think this act helps provide that.

As Mr. Fisher said, we have been in the midst of working with the federal government and Parks Canada in the context of a national urban park, but it has been, I would submit, dreadfully slow. Although we would like to see coordination, and we think it's imperative to have

coordination on these disparate parcels of land, we think that the harmony created with Bill 26 is important with respect to the federal government, the provincial government and the municipal government working together. This composition of land that would fall under a national urban park or a provincial park certainly contains land owned by the federal government; that is the smallest piece touching the Detroit River. The largest portion of the land are several pieces owned by the city of Windsor, and then, of course, there is provincially significant land as well included in this general area.

The ability to bring it together and to look at the context mentioned here, specifically the urban class parks and the adventure class parks, I think provides real opportunity for this piece of land to create incredible natural value for people in Windsor, in the Essex county region, but really across Ontario.

The one thing that has been missing is the urban class park, which I think supports our long-term strategy by connecting new growth areas with high-quality public green spaces. It would certainly help the municipality to deliver nature-based recreation close to where people live without adding red tape or delaying the housing progress that we've been seeing, which has been absolutely incredible. We have seen incredible growth in the Windsor-Essex area, driven by the battery factory, driven by a new hospital, driven by the Gordie Howe bridge that is nearing completion of construction. So this urban park really creates something that is special and unique for our area.

With respect to the adventure class parks, I can also say that it expands recreation and tourism. We're right on the border, and so people on both sides of the border are always looking for opportunities on either side of the border. This is really an opportunity to create an additional tourist amenity where we bring people to Windsor and to Ontario to enjoy outdoor activity options. I think of, specifically in this area, the Black Oak section of Ojibway park, which is an area that cyclists, adventure cyclists, have used without the proper pathways being installed. The ability to add these two classes to this act, Mr. Chair, I would submit, creates a robust opportunity for us to stitch together the disparate pieces by all three levels of government into something that doesn't exist today but something that would put our province and, certainly, our country on the map.

And so, MPP Dowie and those who are discussing this bill, who have put it forward and are supporting it, you have our full support in the city of Windsor, because we want to see something good happen with this valuable land, creating environmental opportunities, working with our friends like Mike Fisher and his group, who have been passionate advocates for Ojibway for many, many, many decades. And they have our full support. We enjoy working with them.

And the best part here: There is no opposition. You will not find a single person in Windsor or Essex county who is against the idea of preserving, protecting and finding a way to stitch together all of these pieces in a useful way that allows people to enjoy their environment and their

natural space in a meaningful way that they have enjoyed for decades and decades but not to the full extent possible. And I think this bill helps us bring forward an opportunity to bring this area alive in a way that it has never seen before.

So with that, I'll end my comments. I'm happy to take questions at your pleasure, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, Your Worship, and thank you very much, Mr. Fisher, for your deputations.

We will move now to the first round of questioning, and we have MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you to Mr. Fisher and Mayor Dilkens for your testimony here.

I think I'm going to start quoting you back, Mayor Dilkens, that no one is "against the idea" of creating this park, and I agree with you. I agree with you that no one is against that idea. In fact, I want to take this opportunity to recognize the previous work that was put in by MP Brian Masse, who moved Bill C-248 to make this park become a reality, and also the local MPP, Lisa Gretzky, MPP for Windsor West. Lisa Gretzky moved many motions that were trying to prompt the provincial government to sell those lands, to make sure, to the feds—or another motion that would help facilitate this vision coming to place. So the official opposition, the NDP, we've supported this. We've put bills forward that are doing exactly this. So, I think this ecological wonder, it's very special, and everyone recognizes that. And so, we want to see that happen. It's taken a long time, and it's about time it happens.

I just want to share with you, while we support this bill in principle, everyone that has talked, many of the deputants that have come here, have been concerned with some of the very vague language that will give the government enabling power when it comes to regulation-making. And it's not just the two classes of parks that are in this bill. There's the adventure class parks, and there's the urban class parks. And those, for the most part, are pretty straightforward, but there's also a clause that gives the government the power to add "such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations." And there's also a provision here that says, "The bill also authorizes the Lieutenant Governor in Council"—which is cabinet—"to make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks and specifying objectives for such parks...." So the concern, while we support this idea, and it really is—Caldwell First Nation, I've met with them. This needs to happen, but it should happen in a clean way. This bill shouldn't have been used to insert language that has people concerned that the government will use this bill to degrade or reclassify existing provincial parks.

And so, my question to you is, would it be a concern of yours if this bill that your community fully supports was in fact turned around to be used to degrade the classification and the protection status of existing provincial parks, not the new urban class park that you're talking about?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: It's not a concern of mine. I think having flexibility, whether—we're going to trust that all governments are going to act reasonably and sensibly, and

if not, they're going to be subject to the decision of the people at the next election.

1630

So I think having the flexibility—and I think particularly of this particular park—adding the urban class just makes a lot of sense. It's almost a glaring gap in my mind. On the adventure side, I think there are many opportunities. I go back to Black Oak, the work and the community that's using this park who we've actually had to try and exclude so we could put the proper pathways in. They didn't even want to be excluded. They were so eager to get in there and use this particular part of the Ojibway area.

So I'm not particularly worried about that. I think governments will act reasonably. If the minister has and cabinet has the ability to respond in real time with more flexibility to add more—I can't think of what the changes might be moving forward, but I would imagine 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now, there may be a different definition as our country grows, as our province grows that we couldn't have thought of today, and the communities may want to see a greater response.

Before I end the answer here, I would just say, I agree with you. I appreciate Brian Masse's work. I appreciate Irek Kusmierczyk, who was trying to work with Parks Canada. There have been people at all levels of government—federal, provincial and municipal—who have been working very, very hard to try to find a resolution here because we all collectively understand that getting to the end of this in a meaningful way, whether that is transferring land to one government or another—it may not be optimal. It may be good to have continued ownership just for easements and being able to access different utilities. But there are different pathways through to get to the end of this in a way that the public really wouldn't know at the end of the day if, ultimately, we have one management of the property so they're all stitched together in a way that creates a unique experience for all users.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you for that. Can you share a little bit about the kind of consultation and work that has taken place with Caldwell First Nation?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: I can't, because that was actually done by the federal government, who has come out a number of times and said that they've negotiated a co-management agreement with Caldwell. So Caldwell has been at the table. I know they have an interest in this, and certainly, like every level of government, we would look forward to working together with them to find a pathway that makes sense.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: One of the other objections, concerns or amendments that we'd like to include in this bill was that it actually prescribes a consultation. Because right now, if this bill were to make changes at regulation, it doesn't prescribe the fact that they would need to have consultation with Indigenous communities, with the people of Ontario.

Would you be interested in hearing more about the fact that we would like to include, right in this bill, consultation

with Indigenous communities so that they can be successful, as appears to have been the case in your community?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: I would leave that up to you as a best practice. I can only speak to what we can do with the land that we own.

Certainly, we have consulted greatly over many, many years. We have been at this pretty much the entire time that I've been mayor, and it predates me. It's been at least 11 years, and we're still not to the end of this. We're looking for a pathway that puts together all of these pieces of land under one management agreement so that the user doesn't understand and doesn't care about who owns which parcel of land and just looks for the unique experience at the end of the day.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. The time is up.

We move to the third party: MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you to our speakers. Mayor Dilkens, thank you for taking the time today to share your experience and ideas with us—and also to Mike Fisher for coming all this way.

There are many things I like about this bill—in addition to the mover of the bill, who, as you know, is my favourite MPP across the aisle. Anything we can do to get people the hell outside and into nature is a good thing. You mentioned, Mike, all the benefits of shinrin-yoku, forest bathing—good for your soul. The world would be a much better place if everyone did their daily nature walk or ride, whatever it is.

I guess just a little bit of concern is the track record of this government with nature, climate action etc. You're saying you have complete faith that we can open up more access but still maintain the biodiversity, especially in your beautiful park I've yet to have been to. So you have faith in—

Mr. Mike Fisher: I can speak to it in terms of the legislation. What I will say about the legislation is because it's written into the provincial parks act, it maintains the language about prioritization of ecological integrity in the management of the park, as well as appreciation of natural heritage and a number of other provisions about preserving ecosystems.

So because of the way that the bill works and adding itself to the existing legislation, it does exactly what we've been asking for and what Bill C-248 looked to do at the federal level, at least in terms of the urban park component, in that it adds urban park legislation that prioritizes ecological integrity as the first priority in managing the park.

In terms of that and looking back to that actual legislation, that's something we talked about within the presentation, looking to it from an implementation perspective and continuing to—for any future implementations over the years, we'd be certainly looking to that. But I think the legislation spells it out very clearly, and it's nicely added as a classification under that.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. And how long have you been president again?

Mr. Mike Fisher: Of the Friends of the Ojibway Prairie?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Yes.

Mr. Mike Fisher: Probably two or three years. I've been with the organization since 2016.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. Great—so a rock-solid track record and huge love for the park, right?

Mr. Mike Fisher: Absolutely.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And then you had three things you were listing, and I just got the third one, sorry. Can you go through your first two recommendations?

Mr. Mike Fisher: One of them, we just touched on: just the fact of identifying that the classifications are adding to the existing legislation, which provides strength and ecological integrity with what's existing in the parks act.

The second was again ensuring something that's been discussed, that we've seen at the federal level: opportunities with the Ojibway National Urban Park with Caldwell First Nation, Chippewas of the Thames and Walpole Island First Nation through the creation of that park. There have been excellent opportunities for engagement, and we've seen certainly Ontario Parks engage with many of these nations as well, so it's something we're hoping to see through the implementation of the urban and adventure parks.

The third was, again, as new classifications are added, allowing for good discussion and community feedback—whatever that mechanism is, ensuring that community has input and there's good discussion.

Then the final was just talking about adventure class parks and just the opportunity that exists there and if it's well thought out to grow the Ontario Parks inventory by protecting new areas that might have been missed before.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Awesome. Thank you. You're a nice, fast talker, so we get a lot in; it's great.

To Mayor Dilkens: You were mentioning Black Oak. I'm not familiar with the park yet. I want to come down to Windsor, so that's on my bucket list to get to the Ojibway Prairie park. Can you tell me about Black Oak? What all goes on there? You're saying there's cycling, but who uses that section of the park?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: That's really used by off-road cyclists and mountain bikers who are looking for more of an adventure-type experience. We've had some issues with some species at risk that we've had to deal with, so we've had to exclude the cyclists while we did some regenerative growing and some removal. But it's the perfect place that we would love to put—actually, through the entire park—a path system that people would be able to use, and create experiences that attract a variety of different users. That's the beauty of what I see here. It's good for those looking for the urban park experience, as well as the adventure park experience.

We have been at this for more than a decade, and there is a level of fatigue—a level, frankly, of government fatigue—by the residents, who are just saying, “You keep talking about this. When are you going to get it done?”

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: I'm hoping we could move fast. I think this bill allows us to move fast and also gives us a harmonious pathway, looking at what the federal government is considering but also giving us options on the provincial side to accomplish the goal at the end of the day.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okey-dokey. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The government side—MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks to both of the speakers, Mike and Drew, for taking time out of your busy schedule and being here today to be part of this process. Both of you have made very detailed presentations on the benefits of this bill.

From an urban perspective, how does access to nature and green space contribute to a community's well-being in your experience? Maybe we'll go to the mayor first.

1640

Mr. Drew Dilkens: Well, we're a growing community, the city of Windsor—but for the last five or six years, has never seen the level of growth, people moving here. It's been absolutely incredible.

What that's meant is a huge expansion in housing. We're expanding roadways. We've got a new border crossing, trying to move more trucks. We're home to the busiest commercial border crossing between the United States and Canada, and notwithstanding our friction with our friends in the US at the moment, that amount of traffic still continues to cross.

So you have a growing community, a very busy community, and having these green spaces lets you have a nature experience where things are just quiet. You don't get that in many places. You don't get that in a regular park. This gives you an experience that is second to none. I would put the Ojibway Prairie Complex against any other urban-type park setting anywhere in the country. It's absolutely remarkable.

For us, it's been an amenity that, again, since the 1950s has been appreciated by the residents in the current form that it's in. But we've continued to add more land to the complex, and now we are looking at a way to stitch it all together. That's been the goal for more than the last decade: How do we put these pieces together in a way that really brings to life all that we have and not one disparate piece after another?

That is really the beauty that I see being provided either through the national urban parks program or through this bill. It just provides options. I think the ability to move fast, the ability to be nimble and flexible with growing trends is extremely important. And I'm excited about this because, like I said, I've been at it for more than a decade. I'm excited that there's another pathway available.

Frankly, since I've been at it, and since Doug Ford has been in government, we have had very good response from the provincial government about what options are available. Regardless of minister, there have been open ears and saying, “How do we do this together?” Because I think there's a collective recognition that we need to work together, number one, but that by putting all of the pieces

together, it's good for everyone. I really appreciate that. It's been a very positive working relationship.

I'm hopeful that we can get this over the finish line and actually get this park open for the benefit of all of the residents in our region, all of the residents in Ontario and the tourists who are going to cross the new Gordie Howe bridge when it opens in a few short months.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you for that. That was an amazing answer, and that is what we're trying to do here with this bill.

Mike?

Mr. Mike Fisher: I think Mayor Dilkens hit on a lot, but maybe I'll just add, a lot of what drives urban parks is an understanding of the changing demographics. Not everyone has a car; we've got growing urban centres, and there's just less and less green space available. So it's that opportunity to get out, to not have to go far from home. You can walk, you can ride your bike, you can take transit and you can just get out, be in nature and experience that quiet and tranquility however you might like to do it.

Certainly, as well—I touched upon it in speaking to the committee—there's a great value of urban biodiversity out there. Ojibway is as good as any location in the country as far as its biodiversity per square foot. Under existing national park or provincial park models, Ojibway might be considered too small to create as a national park or provincial park. But through urban park legislation, it creates an opportunity to protect those areas, to invest in them and to protect these trails so that people can get out and enjoy the rich biodiversity that exists right within their town or city. We're very excited.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: Thank you to Your Worship and Mike. It's refreshing to find people that have a sense of urgency to get things accomplished. We want to make sure that people get out on these trails and get into these parks before they get too old. I find that very refreshing, and I congratulate the both of you on your attitude towards that.

I've got a couple of questions here. What role do you think adventure class parks could play in promoting a healthy, active lifestyle, and how might expanded recreational opportunities through Bill 26 benefit your community or your organization? I don't know whether you wanted to go first, Mike.

Mr. Mike Fisher: I'll go first, sure, on this one. Absolutely, I think one of the biggest benefits from a natural areas perspective—certainly, getting people out, enjoying nature, finding new ways for people to find that appreciation and remain active. I think that's critical. I think as an opportunity—again, we find sometimes within some of our natural areas, and certainly sometimes in Windsor, where you have the creation of recreational areas that don't follow all the rules, just simply because they're looking for opportunities and more areas to take part in that. So having those adventure class parks where it's all managed, it's properly laid out, there's that opportunity to get out and enjoy.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Mike Fisher: Seeing under a minute, maybe I'll pass it over to Mayor Dilkens.

It's a great opportunity to protect biodiversity and a great opportunity to get people out and enjoying the great outdoors.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: Yes, I would just echo those comments. I think Mike hit everything perfectly; I really do.

MPP Paul Vickers: Yes, and that's good.

I guess we only have about, what, 40 seconds left?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Less than 15 seconds.

MPP Paul Vickers: Anyway, we'll—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Next round.

MPP Paul Vickers: Next round; that's right. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Shaw, you start the second round.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: For my second round, I'm going to concentrate my questions on you, Mr. Fisher. I have to say, everyone that I talked to about your deputation here assured me that you're a good guy—so there you go. I just want to let you know you've got a good reputation out there.

I want to drill down on what you said. Honestly, it may just be really a little bit nerdy, but the very fact that you did say that this government has opened up the PPCRA to do this—and that you're saying that you have no concerns because this is nesting. This will nest under the principles and the objectives of the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act. You said that, so that's why you don't have any concerns about these classifications. You look perplexed, but that is what you said.

Mr. Mike Fisher: I'm listening to you and I'm here to reply.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I agree that that gives some comfort, but in this legislation—and let's remind everyone, this is not legislation that just impacts an urban park in Windsor. The changes in this will impact parks all across Ontario.

One of the things that is specified in here is that the LG can make regulations adding new classes of provincial parks, and specifying objectives for such parks. The concern is that these objectives can change and could be contrary to what currently exists in the objectives of provincial parks. In many ways, by bypassing the legislative process, my opinion is that this violates the guiding principles that we both agree are good guiding principles. Opportunities for public consultation should be provided in all aspects of planning and managing of Ontario's system of protected parks and conservation reserves.

My concern is that we've got this good thing where people have ownership and people have been consulted, including First Nations, and that the objectives are quite clear, but by opening up this act and by putting this very vague notion that the cabinet can specify objectives for parks without prescribing any consultation, we're going to undermine what has been a good thing for many, many years.

Do you have any concerns that the government has this kind of power that will not go to consultation when they make those changes?

Mr. Mike Fisher: I would say in terms of no concerns—I would always say we always need to exercise diligence. I support that the legislation relies on the parks act because if you are looking at an adventure park and you are looking to create totally separate legislation, you might have concerns about how that's worded. But the fact that it's nested within the parks act and it has ecological integrity as the first priority of management gives me some ease in understanding that, as urban parks and adventure parks are rolled out, the legislation will ensure that the biodiversity and the ecosystems will be protected. On that front, I would always say to exercise diligence, followed through with implementation, but I believe the legislation is well structured for that.

I am certainly very much in favour of consultation, discussion and having the opportunity to communicate on new classifications of parks. I am not a legislative expert, so I don't know all the nuances of the difference, perhaps, between doing it through a regulation and doing it through legislation fully, and what consultation would occur if it was done through regulation. I would say that whatever mechanism is used, I would be very much encouraged that there is good discussion, good consultation and good opportunity for the public to share their feelings on new classifications.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I agree with you. I will just say that when they make changes through regulation, it bypasses the legislative process, which sometimes, with this government, includes consultation with the community. The most transparent way is not to go through regulation. That can happen behind closed doors. That's the concern that we share here.

1650

The other concern that we have—and I asked this of His Worship Mayor Dilkens—is that in section 9, they have just this general, “Such other class of parks as may be prescribed by the regulations.”

This is very vague. It's not just these two classes—adventure class park or urban class. They've given themselves this latitude to come up with any other class, and they can do it through regulation, which means no consultation, so that's concerning. The second part that's concerning about that is that this government won't assure us that this precludes downgrading the level of protection that existing provincial parks see right now.

I know it's probably difficult for you to say, and you can answer if you want, but I just want to be clear to say that this isn't just about the Ojibway national park. These are changes that will affect all provincial parks across the province, and, as you will know, we're losing biodiversity species at an accelerated and alarming rate.

We're going to move an amendment to make this less vague, and my question to you is, do you not think that debating amendments and having as much consultation from the community is something that would make legislation better and would allay the concerns of everybody who debated before us who had these same concerns?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Mike Fisher: I'm very much in favour of consultation, having discussions. I think the discussion we're having today is very valuable. Again, I'll say that I think the way the legislation in Bill 26 is structured within the existing parks act provides a lot of protections because it's governed by that existing act. So I don't have necessarily a high level of concern for degrading of ecological integrity and biodiversity because it's nested there, but certainly I always believe there's value in consultation, discussions and community input for the process for creating parks.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay. Thank you, and I'll just have the last word—how about that—which is that, as the legislation is written, they can make changes without doing any kind of consultation. That's where my concerns come from.

We thank you for being here today.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. We move to the third party. MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much. I just have a final question for both of you, and that is if you could provide us with one piece of advice, or maybe multiple pieces, as we consider this bill. We'll go with Mike first.

Mr. Mike Fisher: That's a good question. I think there's a lot that's positive. It's a great opportunity to grow the footprint of our protected areas. That could be a big win here.

As you look at our region, especially the Carolinian zone in southwestern Ontario, there's less and less green space, so this provides new opportunities to protect that. I think it just comes down to that diligence and implementation. The legislation does specify that the ecological integrity, enjoyment of nature and all those good things are the priority.

I think it's following through that creation process to ensure the spirit of the legislation is maintained and that this is an opportunity to create new parks, to protect new areas, to get people out and involved in nature. As I mentioned before, I'm hopeful that maybe in some of those cases where you might have higher impact, destructive recreational activities happening where they aren't, you can give them another place to do that in a very well-thought-out way. That's my thinking on it.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I like that, and you've articulated it very well. Thank you very much.

Over to you, Mr. Dilkens.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: I would just say, let's get this done. I listened to the concerns, and far be it for me to advise MPPs on how to act, but with respect to some of the concerns that have been raised, again, I go back to the voters telling you when you get it wrong. If you really misstep and try and downgrade parks that have already been designated, you will hear it loud and clear, and there is definitely a political calculus that would have to go into that.

There's also the Environmental Registry of Ontario. So any changes that are brought forward would naturally have

to be, and would be subject to, comment by the public to the ERO.

At the end of the day, I think we've got to get this done. Let's not delay this for another decade—not that you have, but for my perspective as a community leader, this has gone on for so long. The people are looking for a government to take action to get it done, and if things need to be fine-tuned and changed as you go, clearly the regulations allow this government or a future government to do that as circumstances change. We just want to see action, we want to get this done, we want to work with the government and realize something great for our community.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much. Well, you're talking to an action girl, and I just got here in 2022, so look out. I appreciate that same mindset.

Thank you. That's it from me.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We move to the government side. MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I just want to thank both of you for being here today. Mayor, I like your line you just said there—get it done. And I agree with you, let's get it done because it's long overdue. How will this bill help your community in Windsor thrive as we move forward with this?

Mr. Drew Dilkens: Yes, it's a great question. I would go back to these disparate pieces of land. This is a very robust area that has been protected for a long, long time, for many, many decades. You've had limited access. There have been community fights over certain pieces of land with the federal government to get the federal government to actually commit the one piece of land that abuts the Detroit River, so now we have an ecological pathway for wildlife to be able to stay in the national urban park or the provincial park and actually have the biodiversity and the continuance that was missing for a long, long time. Of course, the animals didn't care who owned it; they would still use the land. But the community fought very hard over the course of many, many years to have the federal government designate that piece of land touching the river as part of a potential national urban park.

Being able to stitch together all of the disparate pieces here is crucial and being able to work with all three levels of government to create something is also crucial. By enshrining this in legislation, the pathway is being created that gives the government an opportunity to act like they don't have today. It's a little more cumbersome today.

I look at this as a get-it-done type of amendment that allows us to move forward. I think it's sensible in terms of the additions that are being requested here. I think there's sensible checks and balances on the back end that would stop a government from acting recklessly.

Again, I appreciate the ability to talk about this. I can't underscore the importance of this issue for the community, and I'm not making that up. I'm not overemphasizing or being dramatic. This has been an issue in the city of Windsor for decades. I just happen to be the bearer of the torch for the last 11 years. Mike just happens to be in his position since 2016. But I can assure you, I've lived here

my entire life and valued this land my entire life because I grew up knowing that it was a special place.

Now, leading the community as mayor, the opportunity to put these pieces together is unlike any other opportunity we've had in the past. We've seen the fits and stops and starts with the federal government and private members' bills there and just the delay that's happening on the Parks Canada side. I'm very hopeful that a resolution can be found that allows us to move forward in a sensible way and, again, get it done.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I just want to thank you very much. I can't wait to come down to Windsor. I might be coming down on the 29th. I'll tell you a story—my uncle immigrated to Windsor in the early 1950s, and I love that city. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Questions? MPP Gallagher Murphy.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, Chair, and through you to His Worship as well as to Mike: Thank you very much for being here today. I think both your deputations have made it very clear what's needed here, and it sounds like you're very supportive of MPP Dowie's bill.

That being the case, I think about all of the potential that this can bring, and I know you both see it as well too. Really, when it comes to enhancing local economies, growing your community engagement, it sounds like you already have that, but we know that tourism is important. I know you were talking about being a border city and being on the border there with the US and probably some of the tourism that comes up from the US.

My question is, what are all the potentials that you see here with new park classes to enhance that local economy and the community engagement? Either of you—Mike, if you want to go first, followed by Your Worship.

Mr. Mike Fisher: Certainly, just speaking to our case in Windsor with the Gordie Howe bridge and the pedestrian pathway, it's something that's heavily talked about, because if you're riding your bike across the new Gordie Howe bridge, once it opens, the first place you're going to stop will be, again, hopefully, at that point, the Ojibway national urban park. So for us, it's very much that cross-border ecotourism opportunity, and hopefully for communities across Ontario.

Certainly, when I was in the Uxbridge area, I stopped by the Uxbridge Urban Provincial Park with my wife and walked the trails. It gives something for people to look to visit all those parks and to visit new communities maybe they wouldn't have visited before because they just didn't know that those amenities were there. So it's certainly an opportunity for communities to protect nature, give their citizens access and give people across the province and internationally one more reason to stop by.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Perfect. Thank you.

To you, Your Worship.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: Yes—great question. I would underscore a lot of what Mike said.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Drew Dilkens: We don't go out of our way to create tourism amenities; we create things for people who live here.

The beauty of living in a border city—and as Mike said, the Gordie Howe bridge—is people will be able to ride their bicycle across the bridge. There's a dedicated bike lane for free. People in Windsor are used to going over to Metroparks and state parks in the state of Michigan because, in fact, they're closer than a lot of the other amenities that we have. This gives people a place to go and a reason to come to Ontario and to stop in Windsor and enjoy nature.

I actually think the opportunities are limitless with what we can do once the Gordie Howe bridge opens because you will literally be discharged from the Gordie Howe bridge right in this area. You will be right there. There will

be no better place to visit than the Ojibway National Urban Park or provincial park at this location.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Excellent. Well, thank you very much to both of you. I greatly appreciate it. You're both very passionate—I love that—about this bill, and I look forward to supporting it too. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. That concludes the question period and the final panel presentation. Thank you very much to both of you for your passionate presentation.

That concludes our public hearings on Bill 26.

The committee is now adjourned until Tuesday, November 18, 2025, at 9 a.m. Thank you very much. Have a nice evening.

The committee adjourned at 1703.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

Chair / Président

Mr. Aris Babikian (Scarborough–Agincourt PC)

First Vice-Chair / Premier Vice-Président

Mr. Sol Mamakwa (Kiiwetinoong ND)

Second Vice-Chair / Deuxième Vice-Président

Mr. Jonathan Tsao (Don Valley North / Don Valley-Nord L)

Mr. Aris Babikian (Scarborough–Agincourt PC)

Mr. Guy Bourgouin (Mushkegowuk–James Bay / Mushkegowuk–Baie James ND)

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto (Mississauga–Lakeshore PC)

Mr. Andrew Dowie (Windsor–Tecumseh PC)

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy (Newmarket–Aurora PC)

Mr. Sol Mamakwa (Kiiwetinoong ND)

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault (Lambton–Kent–Middlesex PC)

Mr. Jonathan Tsao (Don Valley North / Don Valley-Nord L)

MPP Paul Vickers (Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound PC)

Substitutions / Membres remplaçants

Ms. Sandy Shaw (Hamilton West–Ancaster–Dundas / Hamilton-Ouest–Ancaster–Dundas ND)

Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

Mr. Rob Cerjanec (Ajax L)

Clerk / Greffier

Mr. Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Staff / Personnel

Ms. Amanda Boyce, research officer,
Research Services