“This is the place of hope…”

Delivered by Doug McRae at the 2026 Northumberland Land Trust Gala
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I think we're all kind of wondering what we're headed into these days, but I mean, reflecting back, I think this has been an incredibly stable, prosperous time. And over the years we've watched from the time Lake Erie was declared dead, governments respond in various ways, bringing in regulations about pollution. Parks were expanded greatly in the 1970s and '80s. They weren't just recreation places; they were places to protect nature. And, you know, it was always hard-fought, but bit by bit, more and more protections came along. Now, in the name of a housing crisis and other crises, we're throwing everything out the door. The Species at Risk Act is gone. Things that I never could have imagined would be rescinded have been rescinded. And it's been a big wake-up call in the naturalist community and the conservation community to realize these things that we thought were sure things are not.

It feels like we're back in 1950. And I find that really depressing. So, in order not to be depressed, I'm going to say we are different. We will not follow that path. We will always protect the land. It matters. And it is up to us to do this because obviously, the governments aren't going to do it. And I know they have pressures. I'm not completely unsympathetic, but they've equated things like environmental reviews with red tape. Those are two very different things. There's lots of red tape, and I'm all for cutting it. I think probably everyone is. But doing an environmental review is not red tape. That is not some extraneous bureaucracy. So, it is up to us. And one of the things that I think you recognize, and a lot of people recognize, we can do a better job of land protection, and we can do it cheaper. We can do it more efficiently. We don't have to listen, like if someone wants to put a Ferris wheel in our property, we can just say no. We don't have to go through a process for it. It's not what we do. We save land. We protect species.

Our growth, this amazing growth that we've seen here in the last decades, but since the merger especially, it just shows that what we do is working, it shows that it's resonating with people. And the other thing is, if we want to save species and biodiversity, there's a few species where it really takes a particular thing, but in most cases, if you save habitat — meaningful blocks of habitat — you save it all. That's the key. That is what we do.

So, we are limited only by our resources. And in that sense, it's up to all of us. And now is the time because the GTA is coming. I mean, we see it in all our little towns in the county. They're being built up. This is a — this is the last chance, really, the next — I think, decade or so to secure a lot of this property before it's either developed or becomes unaffordable.

And Northumberland County has the highest percentage of forest cover of any county in Southern Ontario. And because I have a very exciting life, I look at Google Maps a lot. I look at air photos on Google Maps and just drool over the county. And if you do that, first of all, you will have an exciting life like mine, but you'll also notice really quickly there's connections everywhere. You see there's the Northumberland County Forest, there's the Cold Creek drainage, there's the Murray Marsh, there's Presqu'ile Park, the Brighton Wildlife Area. There's all these significant biological properties, and you can see them on the air photos — blocks. They're more or less connected. That's what we want to get. We want to connect those lands. We want to protect those lands. Where they've been disconnected, we can reconnect them. That's sort of where we're headed. That's what we're trying to do.

And it's a great mission. And I think, as I say, we're living in a magic time right now when we can still do this. But it is limited by our resources. We have an incredible core of volunteers who help us. I've worked on a bunch of different boards over the years. This is far and away the most productive and enjoyable board I've ever been on. People are in it for the right reason. We're all unified by the same cause. It isn't fractious. It's really an amazing group. We have landowners, people who have given us their land that they love, and they give it to us, which is astonishing.

And we have people who help fund this because even a donation of land, as Amanda said, it costs money. There are some programs that we apply to, but that doesn't mean we're going to get them. And it's just been amazing how people have backstopped our progress to date. So, whatever you can do, whether it's volunteering time, whether it's giving money — any amount of money — whether it's donating land, there's advantages. There's

tax advantages, benefits to you, but the real benefit is knowing that that land isn't going to be a subdivision in 10 years. It's going to be what it was and what you love.

So, I would just ask, please consider helping us some more. I know it's a lot to ask, but man, is it a good feeling. Like, I'm a bit slow on the paperwork, but I am going to be a land donor. And it's just a great feeling to do that. If you know people who have maybe sort of magical properties that — you know they love it, talk — tell them about us. Maybe they would like to join in. But most of all, you know, I just want to say thank you on behalf of everyone. This is an amazing group of people. You have done amazing things, and it is you who are doing it. You're not a massive crowd, and you, this crowd, and a few who haven't been able to come tonight, have funded this thing, have powered this thing, and I'm so excited for where we're headed.

And so, this is the place of hope. This is the place that will always protect land and will do the job regardless of what governments are up to. And, thank you for being part of that to date. I hope you will continue being part of that and bring your friends because it's a great mission.

Thank you.

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