

THE BAXTER



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To learn more about Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance visit our website at:

<https://baxtercreekwatershed.org/>



"Jail Lands", 1954. University of Toronto Map & Data Library. (1954). 1954 air photos of Southern Ontario: Flight A123, photo 045.

BCWA SIGNS LAND USE LICENCE AGREEMENT FOR FORMER MILLBROOK CORRECTIONAL CENTRE LANDS

The Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance (BCWA) is pleased to share an important milestone in our work to conserve and learn from the local watershed. BCWA has signed a five-year land use licence agreement with Infrastructure Ontario for walking trails and other areas of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre property, beginning May 1, 2026. This agreement allows our members and volunteers to use existing walking trails and some grassland areas for low impact outdoor activities, ecological monitoring, stewardship, and environmental education. Stay tuned to our website and newsletters over the coming months as we organize a variety of outings to the property for our members and volunteers.

BCWA has followed the state of the "Jail Lands" closely since the centre closed in 2003, was demolished in 2015, and listed as surplus in 2018. From the beginning, our interest has been rooted in conservation, low impact outdoor recreation, and community learning. Our goal has always been to support the land in a way that protects nature, strengthens the watershed, and provides safe opportunities for people to connect with nature.

This licence is the result of more than a year and a half of thoughtful planning and collaboration. BCWA made a conscious decision early in the process: we would not pursue our interests, including a licence for our activities on the property, without first engaging with local first nations. By engaging with Alderville

and Hiawatha First Nations, we are hoping to develop a vision for how the land could be used for stewardship, education, and ecological research. Last fall, both First Nations provided Letters of Support for our licence application, and we are grateful for their guidance, partnership, and leadership throughout this process.

Under the terms of the licence agreement, BCWA is authorized to use and steward existing walking trails for guided walks, nature outings, and environmental fieldwork. We are also permitted to monitor plants, wildlife, and habitat conditions in specific areas such as the large open grasslands. Any further activities would require additional approvals or amendments, and BCWA will continue to work closely with our partners to ensure the land is treated with care and respect through our activities and use.

Access to the property through the terms of this licence agreement is limited to BCWA members and volunteers who are covered under our organizational insurance. However, we welcome local residents to join BCWA if they are interested in participating in our outings, monitoring programs, or volunteer stewardship activities. This approach ensures safe, responsible use of the land while opening the door for broader community involvement. We invite interested community members to volunteer with BCWA by submitting an application indicating your interests using the form on our volunteer membership page: <https://baxtercreekwatershed.org/our-members>.

This initiative will also be supported through a collaborative project with students from Trent University's Community Research Centre. Their work will help us design monitoring programs, explore new learning opportunities, and strengthen our understanding of the land. Over time, we hope this project will grow into a foundation for "green infrastructure" in our region: supporting skills training, youth engagement, and future green job development. Leveraging the property as a learning hub and for educational programs is fundamental to our 2026-2029 Strategic Plan, which can be found on our website: <https://baxtercreekwatershed.org/our-strategy>.

For BCWA, this agreement represents more than access. It reflects our commitment to stewardship, community learning, and respectful collaboration to grow an ecological and environmental learning hub in Millbrook. We look forward to sharing updates, hosting activities, and continuing to build positive relationships that support the health of the Baxter Creek watershed.

To read our full vision for the property, please visit: www.baxtercreekwatershed.org/old-millbrook-jail-lands.

WELCOMING OUR NEW DIRECTORS

 **Board of Directors Recruitment.** This year BCWA has been recruiting new members and directors for our organization. We are delighted to welcome on three new directors who bring a wealth of environmental education and expertise to support our new strategic plan.

Wilma Armstrong, Director

Wilma Armstrong is an elementary educator with 23 years of teaching experience, primarily in Kindergarten through Grade 3. For nearly 20 years, she has taught at Millbrook South Cavan Public School, where she developed a passion for outdoor learning and environmental stewardship.

A graduate of Trent University (B.A. Honours) and Queen's University (B.Ed.), Wilma has helped create outdoor learning spaces within the school's forested areas, allowing students to explore nature, local ecosystems, and wildlife through hands-on experiences. Following climate education training, she became a strong advocate for nature-based and climate education, helping students develop an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between people and the land while fostering respect for Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing. In recognition of her commitment to place-based learning, she received an award for active participation in the Pathway to Stewardship & Kinship program, which focused on connecting young children with local landmarks, community, and the natural environment.

A lifelong Millbrook resident, Wilma attended both public and high school in the village and, with the loving support of her husband of 45 years, raised her family in the community they continue to call home. She is the proud grandmother of three delightful grandchildren.

Wilma is a founding board member and current Chair of the Old Millbrook School EarlyON Child and Family Centre. She has remained actively involved since helping establish the Centre in 2001.

As a Director with the Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance, Wilma is pleased to contribute her experience in education, community engagement, and environmental stewardship to support the protection of the watershed for future generations.

Stefanie Coxe, Director

Stefanie Coxe is a Ph.D. student in Environmental & Life Sciences at Trent University and holds a master's degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from the University of Helsinki.

Her current research uses high-tech tracking collar technologies and spatial analyses to better understand how free-ranging Canada lynx respond to anthropogenic factors and changing ecosystem dynamics. She also serves as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, supporting the next generation of scientists.

Stefanie has experience in scientific communication, collaboration with government agencies, spatial analysis, drone technology, radio and GPS telemetry, bioacoustics, and other wildlife monitoring techniques. She has contributed to projects across North America and Europe, including studies of non-native shrimp, threatened desert tortoises, cetaceans, bats, protected fish habitat, and endangered Allegheny woodrats.

She enjoys camping, exploring natural landscapes, spending time in and on the water, experiencing diverse cultures, and learning new things. She is enthusiastic about contributing new knowledge to the ecological community and using science to inform evidence-based decision-making through interdisciplinary partnerships and meaningful engagement with local communities.

Heather Klyn-Hesselink, Director

Heather Klyn-Hesselink holds degrees in Medical Radiation Science, Geography, and Geology, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Environmental and Life Sciences at Trent University. Her research focuses on removing

carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through Enhanced Rock Weathering as a climate change mitigation strategy, while also investigating how mineral soil amendments affect agricultural productivity.

An active member of the Trent University community, Heather serves as Vice-President, Senate, for the Trent Graduate Student Association. In this role, she organizes events, serves on numerous university committees, and contributes to policy development, governance, and grant reviews.

Beyond academia, Heather is deeply involved in the Peterborough community, where she has supported local volunteer organizations and municipal election campaigns through outreach and policy research. Outside of work, she enjoys singing, studies with a local vocal coach, performs with community choirs, and is an enthusiastic animal lover who never misses an opportunity to laugh at the antics of her furbabies.

Heather is honoured to serve as a Director with BCWA and looks forward to supporting the organization's mission to protect, preserve, and promote education about this remarkable ecosystem.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW: A HISTORY OF THE JAIL LANDS FROM THE AIR

For nearly a century, the Jail Lands have been photographed from above, first by federal survey aircraft, later by provincial mapping flights, and now through a combinations of airborne sensors and platforms including multi-spectral imagery, airborne lasers (called “light detection and ranging” or lidar for short), as well as drones with high-quality cameras to capture the landscape in vivid detail. These images provide a visual record of how the land has changed, been used, and rewilded over generations. This article presents a curated aerial history of the Jail Lands, tracing its evolution from the earliest 1928 survey to the present day.

The First Aerial Glimpse: 1928

The earliest attempts at aerial mapping in North America used a flexible celluloid roll film pioneered in the late 1880s by George Eastman. During World War I (1914-1918) the technology became widespread for use in military reconnaissance, and was extended to surveying in the early 1920s.



Aerial photography became popular in Canada thanks to Captain E.G.D. Deville, who was Canada's Surveyor General from 1885 until his death in 1924. Deville was a talented scientist and inventor who helped change the way mapping was done. Early in his career, maps were made using photos taken from the tops of mountains. By the 1920s, commercial airplane flights were being used to take photos for mapping and forestry work across the country, largely due to Deville's strong support of the method.

Figure 1: Canadian Vickers Vedette. By Canadian Forces, expired crown copyright. All images made by Canadian forces more than 50 years ago., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=16273>

Following World War I, military surplus aircraft were deployed in Ontario by the Federal government. Rather than military reconnaissance, these missions were primarily used to capture information about the state of forestry resources but the images were also highly valuable for planning transportation and communication routes.

The first image we could find for the site of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre, and across the Millbrook area, was captured on June 19, 1928, most likely using the Canadian Vickers Vedette (see Figure 1). This was the first aircraft designed and built in Canada to meet Canadian weather conditions. It was a single-engine

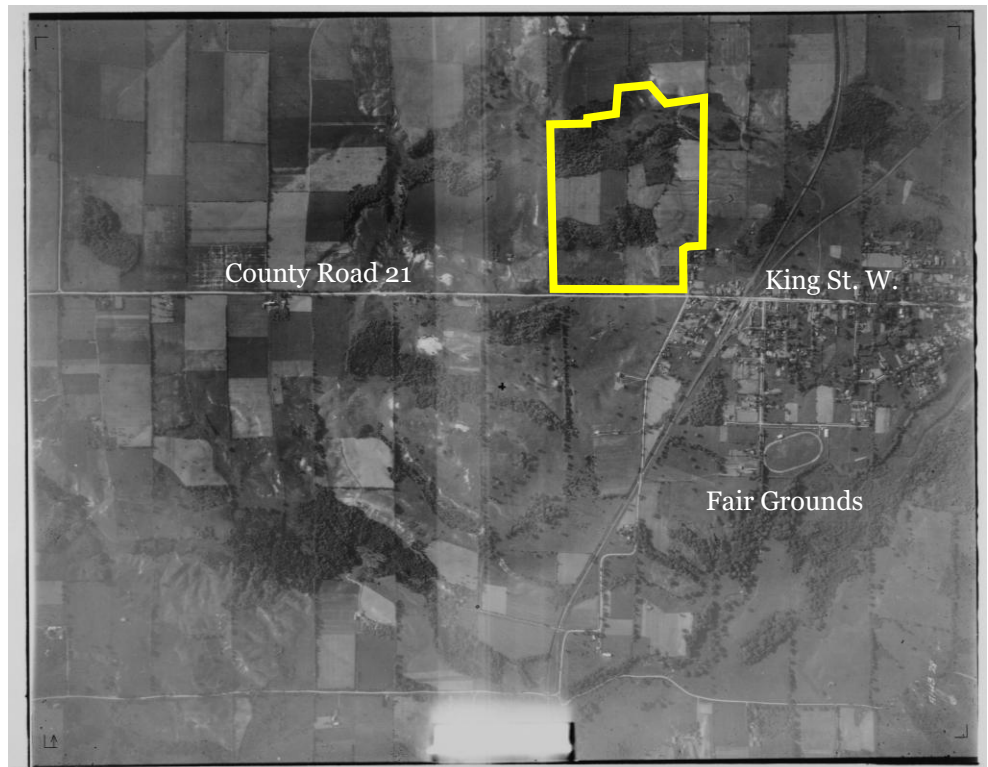


Figure 2: Natural Resources Canada, National Air Photo Library (NAPL). A-Series aerial photograph A143_028. 1928.



Figure 3: Natural Resources Canada, National Air Photo Library (NAPL). A-Series aerial photograph A143_028. 1928.

biplane flying boat purchased to meet the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) demand for an aircraft suitable for forestry survey and fire protection work. The plane went on to have a long and distinguished career in civil operations.

Members and volunteers of BCWA are currently working on creating a mosaic of the watershed using images from the first flights over the area in 1928 (see Figure 2). These images are being purchased by members of BCWA from the archives in the National Air Photo Library in Ottawa. The images are scanned from the original film and sent in digital format to BCWA and next

we register the images into our GIS by snapping the images to existing mapping. The first image we received was captured in 1928 over the Jail Lands and is roughly bounded by Fallis Line in the north, Union and Hay Streets to the east, Tapley ¼ Line to the west, and Zion or 4th Line to the south.

When you zoom into this image and look at the property of the former Correctional Centre, it's spectacular at how high-quality the image is for the time (see Figure 3). With the property being relatively centre of the image, the picture is clear and the amount of information we can discern from this is incredible.

Some of the first observations that jump out from this image is the condition of the woodlands on the property including the areas current mapped as “significant woodlands” by the Township’s Official Plan, those areas on the northern area of the property. It is also apparent that much of the property and adjacent lands were being used for agricultural purposes and pastureland. Notable is the lack of forested areas on some of the adjacent lands, particularly around the former rail lines which were operated by the Midland Railway and the Grand Trunk Railway, later becoming part of Canadian National Railway before the last passenger train ran through Millbrook on May 31, 1951.

Post-War Change: 1950s

Following World War II (1939–1945) there was an expansion of aerial surveying in Ontario. The next image in our series comes from 1954 and shows visible changes in land use, infrastructure, and surrounding settlement (see Figure 4). However, it's notable that much of the landscape of the Jail Lands property was unchanged over a period of nearly 30 years from 1928 to 1954, leading to the conclusion that the Millbrook Reformatory was built sometime in the three years before its opening in 1957.



Figure 4: University of Toronto Map & Data Library. (1954). 1954 air photos of Southern Ontario: Flight A123, photo 045. University of Toronto Libraries (https://maps.library.utoronto.ca/datapub/Ontario/APS_1954/georeferenced/zipped/442.782.zip)

The next aerial image we discovered for the series was taken ten years after the 1954 image, coming from June 8, 1964 (see Figure 5). This is an incredible, high-quality image showing many of the features on the property that were demolished after the correctional centre's closing, including the outbuildings and residences for correctional staff.

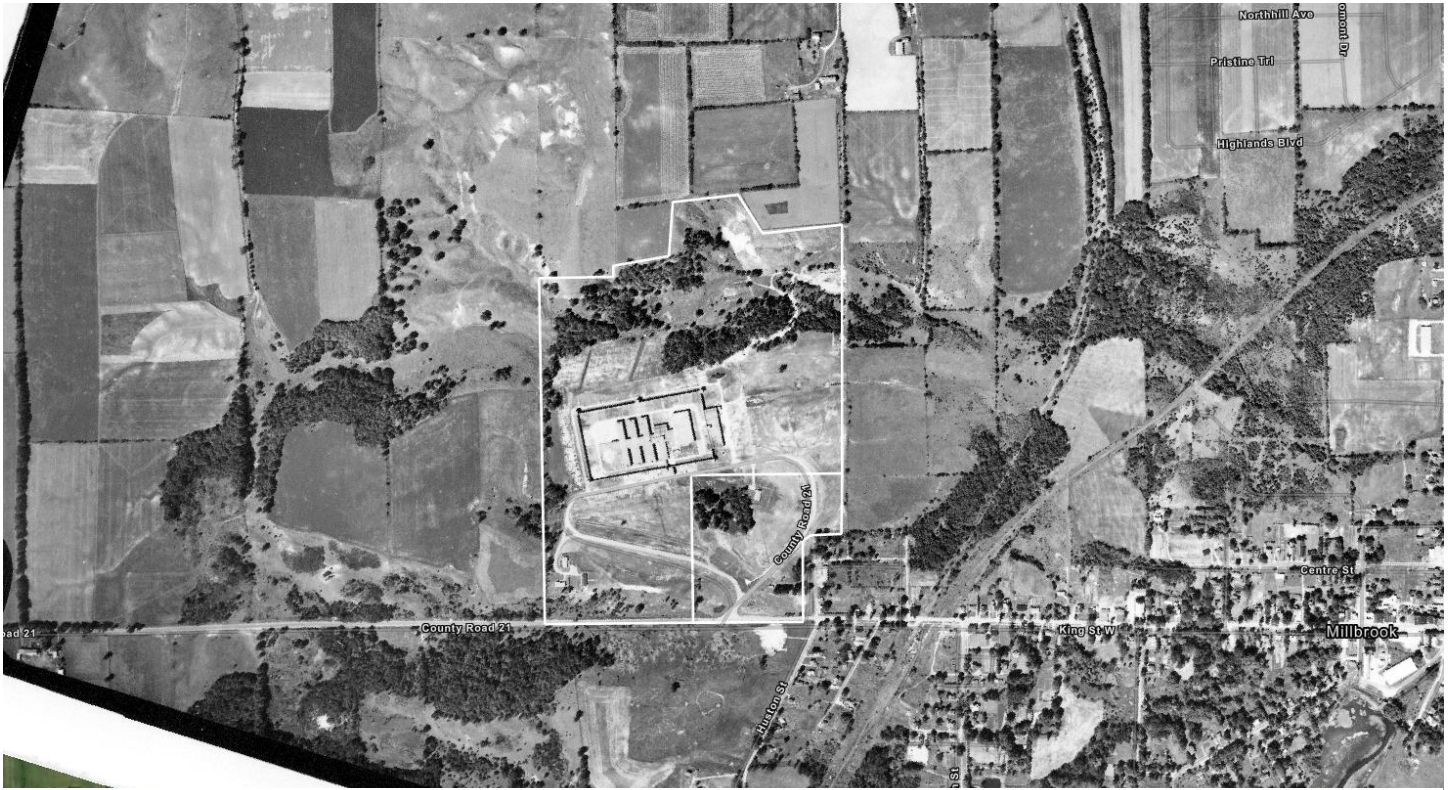


Figure 5: Millbrook Correctional Centre, 1964. Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 1964. Scanned and georeferenced by the Maps, Data and Government Information Centre at Trent University. © Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada 1964.

The Present Day: High-Resolution Aerials

Over the last few decades satellite technology, paired with mapping programs, has meant an increase in image resolution and frequency. The result has been public access to highly detailed maps at little to no cost. Organizations can use these tools to provide insight into the history of land use pertinent to conservation efforts.

For the Jail Lands, it provides us with historical snapshots of what the land looked like: prior to development, while the correctional centre was operating, after it closed, during demolition, and in the current reclamation phase. The three images below are examples of how visual imagery can be used to provide historical context of land use changes. The images range from nine years after the centre closed to the most recent image in 2025 (Figures 6-8) and were provided by Google Earth at no cost to the user.



Figure 6: Google Earth Pro. (2012). Area of Millbrook, Ontario, August 23, 2012. Imagery sources: © Google; © Maxar Technologies data providers listed in Google Earth.



Figure 7: Google Earth Pro. (2015). Area of Millbrook, Ontario, May 22, 2015. Imagery sources: © Google; data providers listed in Google Earth.

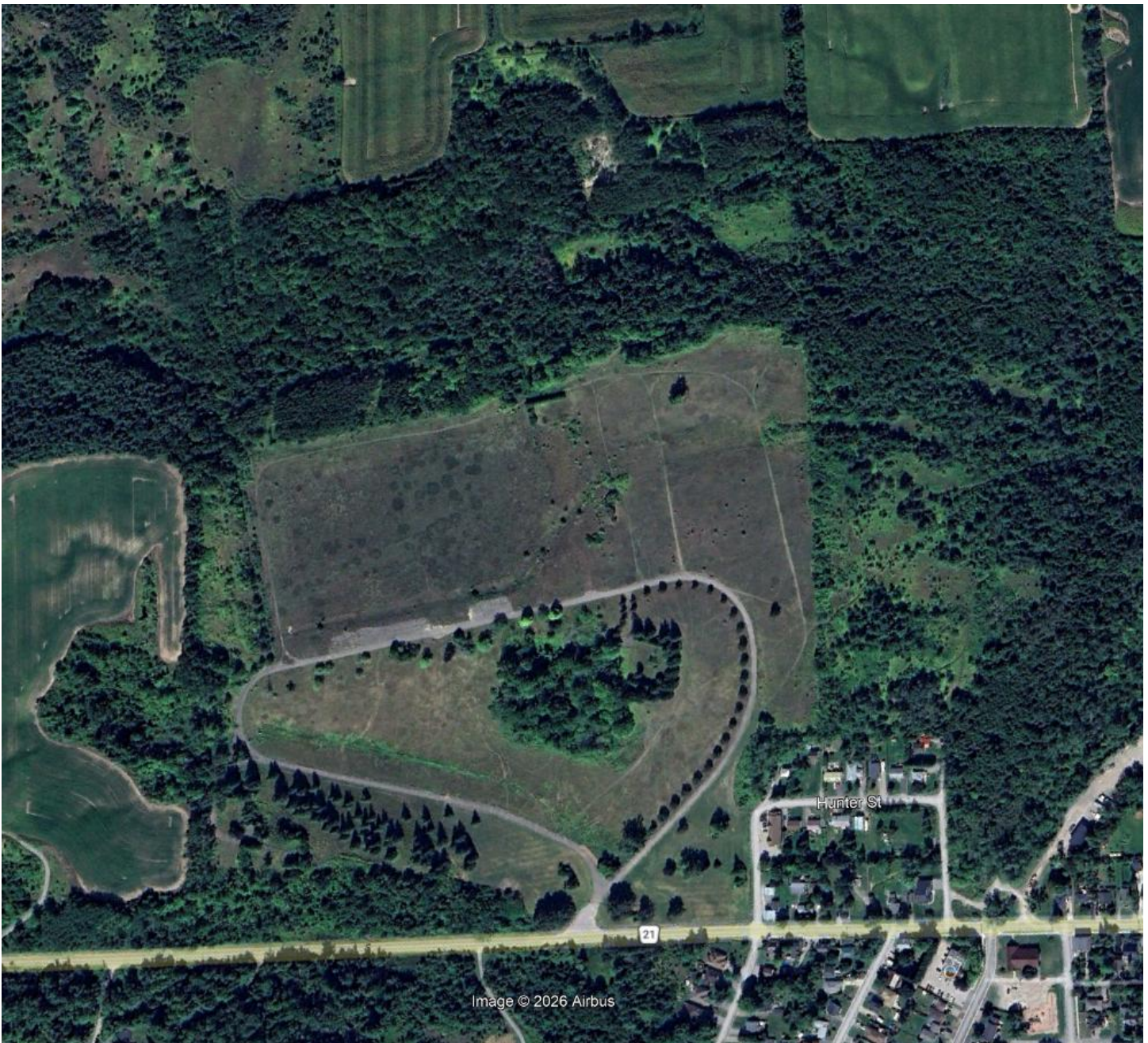


Figure 8: Google Earth Pro. (2025). Area of Millbrook, Ontario, September 2, 2025. Imagery sources: © Google; © Airbus 2026 data providers listed in Google Earth.

Improved sensor technology has also greatly enhanced mapping quality. This includes multi-spectral imaging and high-resolution light detection and ranging (lidar) capable of mapping changes in terrain elevation. Lidar works on the principal of laser pulses that reflect off topographical features and return to the sensors. Below are two shaded-relief maps created from lidar using data collected by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in 2017 and provided as free open data to the public. The image on the left is called a “Digital Surface Model” or DSM (Figure 9) and was created from aircraft lidar laser pulses that reflect off the first, or most elevated, features they encounter. In contrast, the image to the right is called a “Digital Terrain Model” or DTM (Figure

10) and was created from the same laser pulses but from the last reflection from the ground under the trees. These sensors enable us to virtually “see through the trees” and map the terrain in high detail.

We can use these two maps in a “map-math equation” by subtracting one image from the other to calculate the precise height of objects including trees. On the Jail Lands, this information has allowed our students to create a “super canopy height” map which indicates that some of the trees on the property are likely part of mature to old growth forests. In Figures 9 and 10, the white outline is the boundary of the property, and from the images themselves, you can see all of the trees in the DSM on the left, and the detailed terrain in the DTM on the right (where green represents lower elevations, and yellow to red represents increasingly higher elevations).

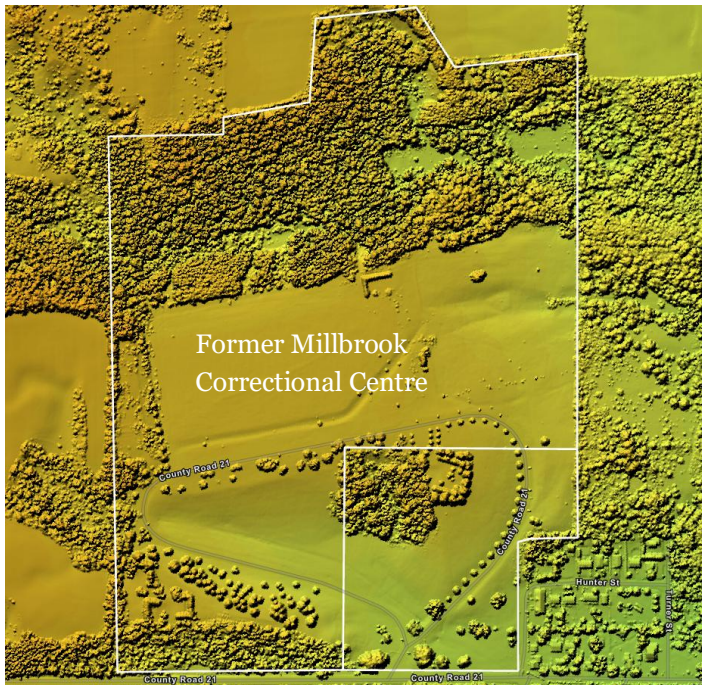


Figure 9: Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry – Geospatial Ontario. (2026). Ontario Digital Surface Model (Lidar-Derived).

© King’s Printer for Ontario, 2026.

Contains data provided by the Government of Ontario under the Open Government Licence – Ontario.

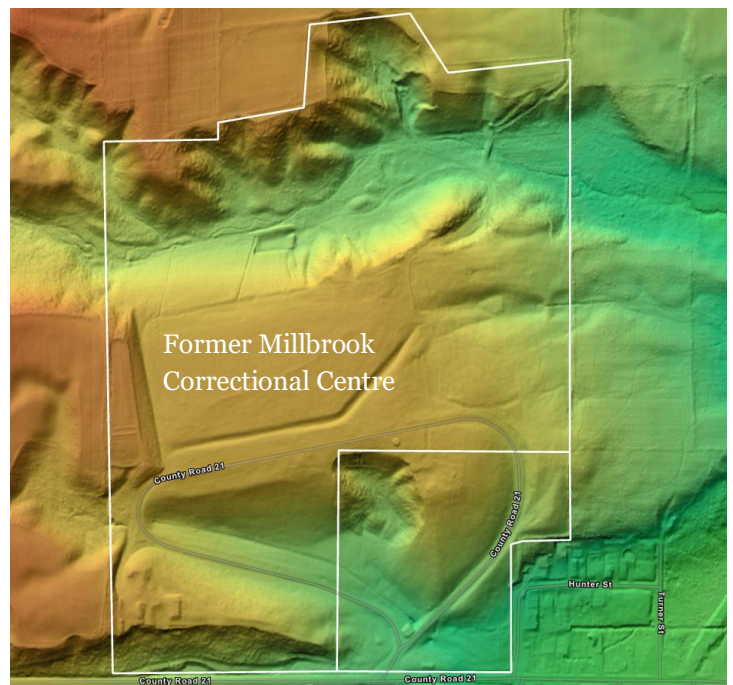


Figure 10: Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry – Geospatial Ontario. (2026). Ontario Digital Terrain Model (Lidar-Derived).

© King’s Printer for Ontario, 2026.

Contains data provided by the Government of Ontario under the Open Government Licence – Ontario.

Drone Perspectives: A New Way of Seeing

Drones have become a well-established technology for acquiring airborne imagery over small areas. Sometimes a drone is referred to as an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) or Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS). Over the last 10-15 years, drones and their sensors have become increasingly lighter and less expensive for both recreational and commercial use.

While some drones are regulated by the aircraft industry, smaller drones (less than 250 grams) are exempt from pilot certification and drone registration requirements. When used responsibly with consideration of landowner

privacy, drones are a valuable and useful tool for environmental research. Even though these smaller “micro-drones” are exempt from licensing and registration, no drone in Canada is completely unregulated. Under Canadian Aviation Regulation 900.06, operators of micro-drones must still obey safety laws and local bylaws. The drone image below captures the fall colours over the south area of the property (see Figure 11).

What the Aerial Record Tells Us

When we look at the images over the property across the decades a few themes emerge. While the land had it’s share of industrial activities, much of the property has been left to nature for well over 100 years. It’s apparent that the forested areas of the property had mature forest in 1928, so it’s quite likely some of the remaining forested areas are mature or old-growth deciduous forest perhaps 125-150 years old. Through the licence we have to the property, we hope to validate the age of these trees based on the super canopy height models and field measurements.

This aerial history can help inform present-day conversations about the Jail Lands. This growing collection is a high value, long-term visual archive to support baseline documentation reports and community decision-making.

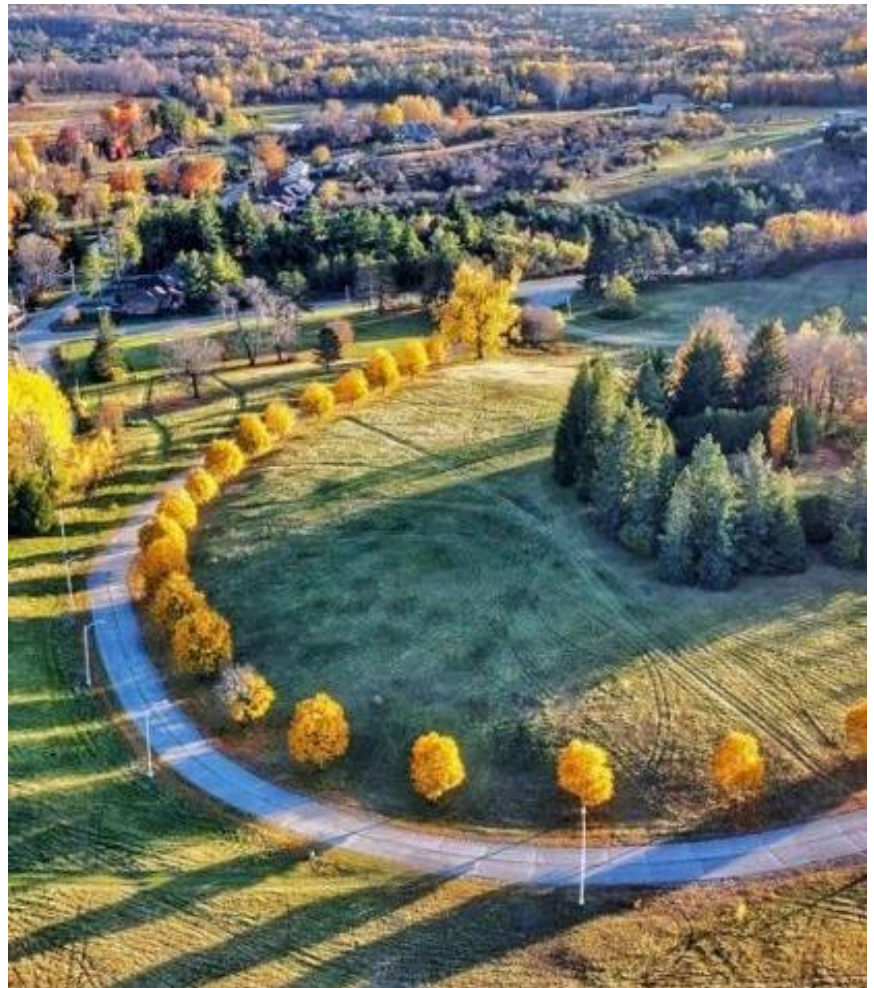


Figure 11: Former Millbrook Correctional Centre, front entrance, north looking south. Courtesy Kirk Hillsley, 2021.

WHAT IS THE JAIL LANDS SURPLUS PROCESS

Understanding Ontario’s Surplus Lands Process & What It Means for the Former Millbrook Jail Lands

Over the last five years we at BCWA have had questions about the status of the property of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre. We have written this article based on our understanding of the surplus process for the property.

Infrastructure Ontario (IO) is a Crown agency of the Province of Ontario that supports the Ontario government’s initiatives to modernize and maximize the value of public infrastructure and real estate. IO leads the long-term planning and preservation of government-owned real estate assets, seeking opportunities to use it in the most effective ways, and supporting the government's commitment to real estate footprint reduction by enhancing and selling surplus assets. Any property within the IO portfolio that is no longer required for the delivery of

government programs and services, is marked as surplus and a disposition process is initiated. For the government, selling surplus properties reduces ongoing operating costs and minimizes risks associated with holding properties in their portfolio.

This article provides an overview of the surplus process for the property of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre lands as understood by BCWA. The article is framed around three themes:

1. How Ontario's surplus process works
2. How the 2018 provincial announcement "Ontario Reducing Red Tape and Accelerating Sales of Surplus Government Property" applies to the property, and;
3. What the status is of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre lands

Why Surplus Land Matters to Communities

Public land disposition affects local planning, conservation, recreation, and cultural relationships. Surplus government public land matters to Ontario communities because it is one of the few opportunities that citizens, municipalities, and Indigenous First Nations have to influence and shape long-term social, environmental, and economic outcomes. Surplus public properties such as schools, hospitals, provincial lands, and former infrastructure sites, can be reimaged and repurposed to meet local community needs instead of being lost to private sale.

In the context of Millbrook and Cavan Monaghan, the settlement area is where growth and development are permitted to occur. Outside of the settlement area, land is mostly privately owned and managed. For sites like the former Millbrook Correctional Centre, which once had economic and employment value to the community, it's important to consider how this vital land can contribute to the community's wellbeing while respecting First Nation's treaty rights as well as environmental impacts of redevelopment.

Surplus land is not "extra" land; it is strategic land. Once public land is sold on the open market, it is rarely recovered. Surplus lands, under certain circumstances, can become community hubs, support trail systems, be used as cultural learning spaces, or become a protected ecological area. Government policies increasingly recognize that surplus land decisions shape the future of local communities, and that public land should remain a public asset wherever possible.

What is Infrastructure Ontario's Surplus Lands Process?

Prior to any sale of surplus lands, IO conducts necessary due diligence on a property. This means IO must fully understand the condition, risks, constraints, and legal status of a property *before* it can be sold or transferred. It's essentially IO's responsibility to make sure there are no hidden problems that would affect the province, the buyer, or the public interest. This may include archaeological assessment, duty to consult First Nations, heritage property consent and environmental assessments. What's important is that surplus land decisions shape long-term community well being and respect First Nations inherent and treaty rights.

Any property within the Infrastructure Ontario portfolio that is no longer required for the delivery of government programs and services, is circulated to provincial ministries and agencies to determine if there is a continued government need for the property.

If no provincial government need is identified, a property is considered surplus and is circulated at the same time to other levels of government, registered eligible not-for-profit corporations, public colleges and universities, school boards and eligible First Nation Indigenous communities. If any of these entities express interest in the property, IO may proceed to negotiate with the interested party for a sale at market value. This is called a Direct Sale. Government of Ontario approval is required before any property is sold. This approval is obtained by an Order In Council (OIC). An OIC is the government's formal sign-off that a provincial property may be sold, transferred, or otherwise disposed of.

As of April 1, 2013, eligible not-for-profit corporations that provide a public benefit are included in the circulation of surplus government real estate. To be included, not-for-profit corporations must meet established eligibility criteria and apply to the Ontario Nonprofit Network, which is responsible for maintaining the registry of eligible not-for-profit corporations. Kawartha Land Trust is a member of this network and has been a partner of BCWA on this specific file since our early beginnings in 2021.

If a property is no longer required by the Province, and no other level of government, eligible not-for-profit organization, public college or university, school board or First Nations community has expressed an interest in acquiring a property through the circulation process, the property may be marketed to the public by an external real estate broker, through an open and competitive process. This is called an Open Market Sale. Again, it's important to note that once public land is sold on the open market, it is rarely recovered for public benefit.

Prior to any sale, IO conducts due diligence on the property. This due diligence may include, but is not limited to, the following activities:

- Market Value Appraisals
- Title Opinions
- Environmental Site Assessments
- Archaeological Reports
- Survey
- Planning Reports
- Heritage Studies – Land & Building
- Duty to Consult with First Nations

The 2018 Ontario Government Announcement: 243 Properties Identified for Surplus Review

The Government of Ontario announced on December 4, 2018, that it is reducing red tape and accelerating sales of surplus government property, making IO's process more efficient. This announcement objective was to put properties back into productive use, benefiting communities and increasing the potential for local economic development. This announcement can be read online here: <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/50633/ontario->

[reducing-red-tape-and-accelerating-sales-of-surplus-government-property](#). The announcement signaled a major provincial effort to evaluate unused or underutilized public lands. The former 106-acre lands of the Millbrook Correctional Centre was one of the 243 properties listed for surplus at that time.

The properties identified in the announcement were at varying stages of circulation, due diligence and marketing. It's important to recognize that in the local context, William Treaty First Nations communities were formally included in the circulation process, which is important as this recognizes their inherent rights and treaty rights and relationships under this process.

Current Status: A Hold on the Property & No Record of Site Condition

There is no publicly available information that the property has moved forward in the surplus disposition process since 2018. In fact, local reporting and IO's continued environmental monitoring suggest the property remains in a holding pattern rather than active disposition. This is consistent with the fact that IO continues groundwater monitoring on the property and has not issued what is known as a Record of Site Condition (RSC). After demolition of the buildings, Environmental Site Assessments (2011–2012) identified multiple Areas of Potential Environmental Concern and contamination requiring monitoring. IO continues groundwater monitoring due to persistent perchloroethylene (PCE) detections. Because contamination concerns remain under investigation, the property does not have a Record of Site Condition, which is required before redevelopment or transfer of a property under Ontario's Environmental Protection Act. This supports our understanding, as noted by a collaborative student project completed between BCWA and Trent University's Community Research Centre, which was a groundwater review based on public documents on the ongoing monitoring and contamination concerns.

In terms of the disposition process, we can also reference local reporting. We know from a 2021 article in the Millbrook Times that the Province suggested the Township assume environmental monitoring responsibility at the former correctional centre property. At the time, township staff recommended that the Province keep full control of testing and oversight until the land is fully cleaned, filed, and audited with a formal Record of Site Condition. We also know that the Township has a formal interest in the property and has asked to be notified by IO when it becomes eligible to pursue a potential acquisition of the property. Read the full December 2, 2021, article in the Millbrook Times online:

<https://themillbrooktimes.ca/province-suggests-township-assume-environmental-monitoring-responsibility-at-the-former-jail-property/>.

More recently, we also know from a Millbrook Times article in 2024, that a consultant was hired by the Township and generally agreed with the provincial consultant's conclusion that conditions at the site are steadily improving, but disagreed with the recommendation to reduce frequency of the groundwater monitoring. Some of the recent tests have detected the presence of chloroform and trichloroethene (TCE), which had not been observed in previous investigations, as well as an increase in the turbidity in the water, which can affect water treatment processes. The township's consultant Cambium recommended that the monitoring program continue as usual until there is clarity about these issues. The most recent tests of the Millbrook Municipal

Supply Wells continue to show no contamination at the wellhead supply for the township. The full Millbrook Times article from January 6, 2024, can be read online here: <https://themillbrooktimes.ca/former-millbrook-correctional-facility-groundwater-investigation/>.

While we can only speculate as to the municipal interests in the property, we do know that any future use or redevelopment of the property must adhere or conform to the land use policies for this site based on the Official Plan for the Township of Cavan Monaghan (<https://www.cavanmonaghan.net/build-and-invest/development-and-planning/official-plan/>). As of April 25, 2024, the property is designated in the plan under section 4.5 as a “Millbrook Special Development Area”. The plan suggests that “the site of the former Millbrook Correctional Facility represents a significant development opportunity in the Township. Redevelopment of this site is encouraged subject to the following policies”:

- a) Permitted residential uses may include special needs, seniors, long-term care and retirement homes in accordance with the policies in Section 4.1.3 of this Plan;
- b) Permitted institutional uses may include education or health care related uses;
- c) Permitted employment uses may include research and development, business and professional offices and conference centres; and,
- d) Any development proposal shall be accompanied by a comprehensive development plan for the entire property. The parameters of the comprehensive development plan shall be established through the pre-consultation process. The development plan shall include a comprehensive servicing strategy recognizing the location of the lands within the Oak Ridges Moraine and Source Water Protection Area.

Why the Property Still Matters: Community Value & Future Potential

Despite the property including an area of concern, or a condition from contamination associated with prior activities on the land, areas on the property provide critical headwater and drinking water source protection, groundwater recharge, woodland and wildlife habitat, and climate resilience.

In the context of green infrastructure, these functions are known as “ecosystem service values” which people and wildlife benefit from. Additionally, the lands offer wide open greenspaces that offer a range of outdoor recreation opportunities such as community gatherings, walking trails, winter activities, education and nature appreciation, all of which is proven to have social, mental and physical wellness benefits.

While BCWA has an interest in protecting and conserving these lands for the intrinsic ecological values of the property, the organization made a deliberate decision to first engage with local First Nations under the spirit of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent or FPIC. This is an international human rights principle that grants Indigenous peoples the right to give or withhold consent to any project or policy that affects their lands, territories, or traditional resources. Through this engagement, we have begun discussions of a potential collaborative for stewardship and learning opportunities with leaders from Alderville and Hiawatha First Nations. This approach to engagement is grounded in a respect for inherent Indigenous rights and First Nation treaty rights and our interest in land-based learning.

With the five-year licence to areas of the lands starting this year, our hope is to engage the community as members and volunteers in ecological and environmental learning. These activities will include field studies, ecological monitoring, community science, and ongoing research partnerships such as Trent University's Community Research Centre projects and other universities and colleges with expertise in environmental science, groundwater research, and most importantly Indigenous learning.

Conclusion: A Property in Waiting and a Community Ready to Lead

Despite the hold on the property and absence of a Record of Site Condition, the property remains deeply valued. Community groups, residents, and First Nations continue to see potential for conservation, learning, and low-impact recreation. The land's future is still open, and together, our community can be prepared to steward it responsibly.

“Nature is ever at work healing her wounds and restoring what man has marred.” — John Muir

CONTAMINATION OF THE FORMER MILLBROOK CORRECTIONAL CENTRE

Although the former Millbrook Correctional Centre closed more than two decades ago, there continues to be a legacy of contamination. This article brings together some of the facts to help understand the site's history and its remaining risks, including our research objectives going forward.

The former correctional centre operated from 1957 to 2003. During those decades, activities like laundry, machine shops, and waste disposal used chemicals that could affect soil and groundwater. In the 2023-24 academic year, a collaborative project titled “Groundwater Contamination Review of Former Millbrook Correctional Centre and Watershed” was completed by Keyana Kamps, a former Forensic Science student at Trent University. This project was completed through the Trent Community Research Centre in collaboration with Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance (BCWA). This research project aimed to inform stakeholders and rightsholders about the history of contamination on the property and potential liabilities under future uses. To support this research, a series of interviews were conducted with former Millbrook Correctional Centre employees with the aim of receiving firsthand information regarding chemical and hazardous waste activities and disposals on site.

The participants shared knowledge of specific locations where waste was being disposed of on site, while also providing detail regarding what types of chemicals may have been used within the facility, and were then being disposed of on site. Based on the interviews of some former workers, this disposal method was routine practice at the time, where all waste was being disposed of on location, up until approximately 1980. Around this time, there was a transitional period where the government introduced BFI waste bins, and a regular garbage collection was set up, with a garbage truck taking the waste to an off-site disposal area.

Main Contaminant of Concern: PCE

The chemical found most often in the groundwater is **perchloroethylene (PCE)** which is a solvent commonly used in dry cleaning and machinery maintenance. It first appeared in 2014 at **5.6 micrograms per Litre (µg/L)** in one monitoring well on the property but has been steadily decreasing. This number is **above the Site Condition Standard (1.6 µg/L)** but **below the Ontario Drinking Water Standard (10 µg/L)**. This is important, because observing the contaminant at a level above the Site Condition Standard slows the process of filing a clear RSC which would reduce liability. A RSC has not been produced yet due to failure of contaminants meeting applicable site condition standards. Environmental testing began in 2011, and groundwater monitoring continues today.

What this means for residents

Municipal drinking water has shown no contamination above Ontario Drinking Water Standards since monitoring began in 2013. Monitoring also indicates that PCE levels on the site are declining over time, which is a positive finding. It's also important that the deepest aquifer connected to the site (called Layer 3), which supplies Millbrook's drinking water, has never shown contamination above drinking water limits.

Other Chemicals Found

A few other chemicals have appeared in monitoring wells on the property:

- TCE (a breakdown product of PCE)
- Chloroform
- Benzene (one-time detection)

These chemicals were found at levels above site standards but below drinking water standards, except chloroform, which does not have a drinking water limit. The report by Kamps notes that chloroform reached 28.1 µg/L in one monitoring well in 2020, but dropped to 3.8 µg/L in subsequent tests.

Again, none of these contaminants have been detected in Millbrook's municipal drinking water.

What We Know for Sure – Our Drinking water remains safe.

The report from Kamps and all the reports investigated confirms, "Since 2013, there has been no contamination detected in the municipal drinking water supply."

We also know that contaminant levels on-site are decreasing.

PCE, the main contaminant, has steadily declined since 2014. Contamination is present on the property, but not at levels that threaten municipal water. All groundwater samples remain below Ontario's drinking water limits.

We also know that the site is environmentally sensitive and important to protect.

It contains:

- Baxter Creek headwaters
- Significant groundwater recharge areas
- Mature forests, meadows, and cold-water fish habitat

“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.” — Albert Einstein

What We Still Don’t Know

Despite years of monitoring, the collaborative project with Kamps from Trent University raised some important questions:

Has contamination moved off-site?

While monitoring wells have been installed on site within the property limits, the extent of potential off-site contamination still warrants further investigation. No monitoring wells exist downslope of the property, even though the land naturally drains toward Baxter Creek. We don’t know if contamination has entered soils/soil pore waters or plants.



Figure 12: View of the open grasslands on the property of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre. Image taken from a licensed walking trail facing west. Courtesy Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance, 2026.

How deep or widespread the contamination is in some areas.

Some wells were not drilled deep enough to detect contaminants that may have sunk over decades. Drilling deep wells comes with some risks and must only be done by qualified officials. This is because drilling a well

may introduce pathways for contaminants to move deeper through the ground. This leads to another question from the collaborative study:

Whether the middle aquitard (Layer 2) is fully preventing downward movement.

It has been a long held understanding that the middle aquitard, which is primarily clay, is acting as a natural impermeable layer, preventing contamination from moving deeper in the underlying aquifer. Further research would help assess if there is chemical evidence indicating this layer is functioning effectively.

Recommendations for Future Research

The report by Kamps makes several clear recommendations that our organization wants to further pursue:

1. Conduct off-site groundwater and soil monitoring.

This is the most important next step to understand whether contaminants have moved beyond the property. Field sampling of surrounding creek channels and other low-lying areas of land where sediment could be transported to and deposited could demonstrate if any contamination moved offsite. Additional, monitoring programs could be considered for monitoring groundwater off the property.



Figure 13: White Pine trees on the property of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre. Picture courtesy of Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance, 2026.

2. Continue quarterly groundwater sampling.

Because new breakdown products (like TCE) are appearing, reducing sampling is not advised. It's important to continue monitoring the groundwater on the property and in the municipal drinking water supply regularly.

3. Assess if future consumptive demand may drawdown on the aquifer and in turn, draw contaminants down into the deeper aquifer which is the source of municipal drinking water.

Future development of the Millbrook area will increase demand on the well system. It is imperative that future research assess the potential for any aquifer drawdown and the effect that may have to draw contaminants from the Jail Lands into the municipal water supply. If those upper layers contain any contaminants, and if there are any fissures or cracks in the upper layers, the stronger downward pull could potentially move those contaminants closer to the deeper aquifer that supplies municipal

drinking water. This isn't a current confirmed issue, but it's an important area of future research to make sure growing water use doesn't unintentionally affect water quality.

4. Consider conservation or educational uses for the land.

Low impact uses would protect the Moraine and avoid risks associated with residential development. The land contains a wide range of biodiversity and ecological values, making it an ideal site not just for conservation, but also for environmental learning. There is incredible opportunity to engage all ages of students, from kindergarten to grade 12, through to college and university, as well as the public, to learn about the property and the intrinsic ecological values it offers.

BAXTER CREEK WATERSHED ALLIANCE'S VISION FOR THE JAIL LANDS

🍃 The Millbrook Correctional Centre closed in 2003, the property has been vacant since 2015, and surplus for years. In 2018 the property was listed by the province to be sold by 2022. Years later the property continues to be on hold without a record of site condition, complicating its sale. Yet the property continues to attract interest from the local community, for the benefit as an open greenspace for educational and outdoor recreation. What will the future hold for the property? Can this property offer vital public value to the community and future generations of humans and wildlife?

A Shared Vision for Land-Based Learning at the Former Millbrook Jail Lands

The former Millbrook Correctional Centre lands have long been a place where people walk, observe, and quietly connect with nature. Our vision for the future of this space builds on those passive uses; not replacing them but deepening them. We imagine a landscape where low-impact outdoor recreation, environmental education, nature appreciation, cultural learning, and community wellness all coexist.



Figure 14: Perspective view of the grasslands and viewshed on the property of the former Millbrook Correctional Centre. Image taken from a licensed area facing southeast. Courtesy Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance, 2026.

BCWA is engaging with Alderville First Nation and Hiawatha First Nation with a hope to develop a collaborative vision that outlines a bold, hopeful direction for what this land could become. The BCWA vision is of a co-governed, culturally grounded, community-serving outdoor recreation and ecological learning hub on the former jail lands.

At the heart of this vision is a new **Baxter Creek Ecology Learning Program**, being designed to deliver through three integrated pathways:

- **K–12 Biodiversity Education** — curriculum-connected field learning, species identification, and watershed stewardship for local students.
- **Community-Based Research** — applied monitoring, post-secondary partnerships, and hands-on environmental science.
- **Indigenous Knowledge Outreach** — cultural protocols, ceremony, and First Nation-led land-based learning.

BCWA hopes that this collaborative can set out a governance model rooted in shared leadership. We commit to OCAP® principles (principles of ownership, control, access and possession), ethical space, fair compensation, youth training, and long-term relationship building. If realized, this program could support land-based learning in a wide-open greenspace through youth outdoor camps, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and community-led ecological and environmental learning. These activities in an outdoor setting can strengthen ecological health and cultural revival while helping our community preserve and grow a community-oriented sense of place.

Most importantly, this vision positions the former jail lands as a place of **community benefit**, not development pressure. A place where ecosystem services, outdoor recreation, cultural learning, and environmental education can grow and develop together. A place where stewardship is shared, respectful, and focused on future generations of humans and wildlife.

We look forward to continuing this work with our partners, our community, and everyone who cares about the health and future of the Baxter Creek watershed. We know being in the outdoors brings health and wellness benefits. We know the land is sensitive being in the heart of our wellhead protection area and the Oak Ridges Moraine. We know our future depends on developing future generations of leaders with knowledge, skills, and a passion in green infrastructure. The opportunity to conserve, restore, rehabilitate, and protect this property as a publicly accessible outdoor recreational and ecological educational hub located within the settlement area of a rapidly urbanizing community, for future generations to enjoy, will come along only once. Once it is gone, it will be gone forever.

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Baxter Creek Watershed Alliance (Corporation# 1348381-9) is a Canadian federal nonprofit corporation entity registered with Corporations Canada, located in the Village of Millbrook, Township of Cavan-Monaghan, County of Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

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