

## **An Exploration of the Ontario Government's Greenbelt Development Proposal**



## **An Exploration of the Ontario Government's Greenbelt Development Proposal**

The Greenbelt is a beautiful landscape that surrounds much of the Greater Golden Horseshoe area. It is an area where the environment is protected and able to flourish all while providing Ontarians countless incredible benefits. It is the backbone of the Greater Golden Horseshoe area, benefiting all aspects of life including wildlife, agriculture, health, and the economy. It was created in 2005, to stop further loss of farmland, reduce urban sprawl, and combat the consequences of rapid development (The Narwhal). The Greenbelt has remained untouched for the past several years, however, as the population of the Greater Golden Horseshoe area continues to rapidly grow many believe it may be of benefit to utilize some of the land. New projections released by Statistics Canada propose that Ontario's population may grow from 14.8 million to approximately 19 million by 2043, however, it may even surpass 21 million (Fox). These projections have to be accommodated for, otherwise, the influx will leave many Ontarians struggling to lead happy and healthy lives. Recently, to tackle this housing crisis the Ontario provincial government proposed to swap some of its protected lands in the Greenbelt to build homes, and introduce newly protected lands elsewhere. The proposal has sparked heavy debate amongst Ontarians, with some advocating for the usage of the land for development, while many strongly protesting against it. As the population readily increases, it leaves many wondering what is the right choice?

### **Pros of the proposal**

Projections show that now more than ever infrastructure needs to be created in order to accommodate the large expected growth of the population. Many experts agree that this growth is incredibly beneficial for Ontario. Matti Siemiatycki, professor and the director of the Infrastructure Institute at the University of Toronto states,

“Population growth is really good and really important for the province. It helps fuel economic growth, it reunites families and it is great for the culture and the dynamism of our

communities. But it also will continue to put pressure on our infrastructure which is already stretched,” (Fox).

As professor Siemiatycki states, this spike in population is a great thing for Ontario however if not properly planned for, it may cause more harm than good. Putting more pressure on systems like health care, education, etc. without any solutions will lead to a reality where many will struggle to lead happy and healthy lives. The primary benefit of the proposal is that it will aid in finding a solution to the housing crisis in the Greater Golden Horseshoe area. As stated, as the population continues to rapidly grow solutions have to be found. The lack of land in the Greater Golden Horseshoe area has resulted in house prices skyrocketing and being unaffordable for many families. This is why the government has proposed to swap some of its protected lands in the Greenbelt with other lands to build residential areas. The finalized plan will remove approximately 7,400 acres of land from the Greenbelt to construct around 50,000 homes. The plan will then add 9,400 acres of land to the Greenbelt in other areas (The Narwhal). These residential developments in the Greenbelt will not only lead to more affordable housing but will also reduce urban sprawl and provide citizens with a greater quality of life. From an economic and governmental perspective, it may seem like swapping the protected land is the right choice, however many others disagree.

### **Cons of the proposal**

The main argument against the proposal is the harm it will have on the environment. The Greenbelt is one of Ontario's most biologically rich areas (Greenbelt). It provides Ontarians with countless benefits through its natural resources. Some of the Greenbelts' benefits include filtering groundwater that feeds into the river systems that flow throughout Canada. It also absorbs rainwater, which in turn helps to prevent costly flooding. When experiencing drought, the Greenbelt provides a defense against diseases and other stresses (Greenbelt). The abundance of forests and wetlands helps fight against climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Finally, each year the Greenbelt

provides \$3.2 billion in ecosystem services and it provides a home for protecting 78 at-risk species (Greenbelt). The Greenbelt provides Ontario with countless benefits and if homes were constructed on this protected land it could cause irreversible harm to this precious natural resource. Parks Canada issued a statement after a thorough analysis that stated,

"Should these lands be removed from the Greenbelt and developed as proposed, Parks Canada's analysis suggests that there is a probable risk of irreversible harm to wildlife, natural ecosystems and agricultural landscapes within Rouge National Urban Park thereby reducing the viability and functionality of the park's ecosystems and farmland," (Carter).

Parks Canada's statement further backs the idea that using this protected land to construct homes will strip away the natural resources Ontarians highly benefit from. By viewing the proposal from an environmental lens it is clear that the proposal will only lead to more environmental harm.

Another argument against the proposal is that there are alternate ways to tackle the housing crisis. According to a report released by the Environmental Defence,

"Ontario already had enough land designated to build two million new homes – more than its overall goal of 1.5 million over the next decade – before it decided to release parts of the protected Greenbelt and force municipalities to earmark even more farmland for housing," (Gray).

Many believe that there are multiple alternative solutions to tackle the housing crisis, rather than taking land from the Greenbelt. Some alternatives include condensing residences and spreading communities throughout the Greater Golden Horseshoe area. Phil Pothen, the Ontario program manager of the Environmental Defence states, "There is not the slightest hint of evidence or any reason to expect that bulldozing Greenbelt land will do anything to reduce the housing shortage, let alone home prices," (Jones). He, like others, believes that there is enough land to meet the demand for housing spread throughout other areas in Ontario.

Another concern surrounding this proposal is that it may serve as an example for future development projects. In 2018, when Premier Doug Ford was elected he proposed opening up the Greenbelt for development. After facing backlash Premier Doug Ford stated, “They don’t want me to touch the Greenbelt, we won’t touch the Greenbelt,” (The Narwhal). Now that promise has been broken, however, Premier Doug Ford justified the proposal by saying the province's housing crisis has worsened (Carter). Swapping this land will send dangerous messages. Developers may take this proposal as an example that with the right pressure they can obtain other protected lands from the government. This in turn can be catastrophic as it can lead to the loss of Ontario’s most precious natural resources.

The final concern surrounding the proposal is how all public input was ignored. The government consulted the public following the backlash they faced. The government released a statement saying,

“Overall, there was strong support for continued Greenbelt protections and broad opposition to any removals or redesignation of lands under the Greenbelt Plan or Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. Numerous submissions asserted that the proposal is contradictory to the vision and goals of the Greenbelt Plan and requested a full withdrawal of the proposal,” (Jones).

However, even with many members of the public rejecting the proposal the government stated that “No changes were made to the proposal as a result of public consultation,” (Jones). This decision ultimately sends a message to the citizens of Ontario that the ideas of the government overrule the public's opinion. It sends a message that the public's voices will not be heard.

## **Conclusion**

Personally, I am against the proposal to swap some of the Greenbelts protected land with land elsewhere. The most prevalent reason I am against it is how harmful it can be to our environment. As stated, the Greenbelt provides Ontario with countless incredible benefits. Its ecological systems help filter

our water, prevent flooding, fight climate change and provide a home for many at-risk species. Swapping these lands will be harmful as wildlife may be displaced and these resources can be destroyed. Although the proposal does state that it will introduce newly protected land elsewhere, precious resources will still be destroyed. I believe the Premier and the government should listen to public opinion and reconsider the proposal. There are many alternatives to tackle the housing crisis without touching the protected land in the Greenbelt. If the protected land is swapped it will send messages to future development projects that with the proper pressure protected lands can be taken. As a citizen, I believe that is completely wrong. If the land is promised to be protected the government should stay on that promise otherwise the public will lose trust in the government. Of course, the housing crisis we face is difficult and the government may believe that this is the only right choice, but there is never only one answer. Ontario is a large province, we have great minds and new solutions can be found. I urge the government to reconsider its decision and make one that is beneficial for everyone.

## Works Cited

Carter, Adam. "Proposed Changes to Greenbelt Risk 'Irreversible Harm,' Parks Canada Says | CBC News." CBCnews, CBC/Radio Canada, 6 Dec. 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/greenbelt-ontario-changes-parks-canada-1.6675993>.

"Decision on Proposed Redesignation of Land under the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan." Environmental Registry of Ontario, <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-6218>.

Fox, Chris. "Ontario's Population Could Grow by More than Six Million over the next Two Decade." Toronto, CTV News, 28 Aug. 2022, <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/ontario-s-population-could-grow-by-more-than-six-million-over-the-next-two-decade-1.6045745>.

Gray, Jeff. "Ontario Has Enough Land for Two Million New Homes without Touching Greenbelt: Report." The Globe and Mail, The Globe and Mail, 28 Feb. 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ontario-greenbelt-expansion-housing/>.

Jones, Ryan Patrick. "Ford Government Forges Ahead with Greenbelt Development Plan despite 'Broad Opposition' in Public Consultation | CBC News." CBCnews, CBC/Radio Canada, 22 Dec. 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/greenbelt-oak-ridges-moraine-regulations-1.6692337>.

Ken Grafton / March 6, 2023 / 5 min read, et al. "Who Really Benefits from Ontario's Bill 23?" Canadian Dimension, <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/who-really-benefits-from-ontarios-bill-23>.

“Learn How Ontario Thrives Thanks to the Greenbelt.” Greenbelt Foundation,  
<https://www.greenbelt.ca/learn>.

The Narwhal. “Ontario's Greenbelt.” The Narwhal, 25 Feb. 2023,  
<https://thenarwhal.ca/topics/ontario-greenbelt/#:~:text=Its%20new%20plan%2C%20unveiled%20in,the%20Greenbelt%20in%20other%20areas>.