

## **Greenbelt Development – Is increased housing worth environmental degradation?**

The Greenbelt is an environmentally protected region that “horseshoes” the Greater Toronto Area, or, the GTA. Ontario Premier Doug Ford made a strong promise when he was elected, telling the province: “I govern through the people, I don’t govern through government. The people have spoken – we won’t touch the Greenbelt.”<sup>1</sup> Since 2018, Premier Ford has understood the unpopularity of the possibility of developing the Greenbelt. However, in 2022, he decided to go through with the development against the wishes of many Ontarians. I am against this plan because I believe the resulting environmental degradation to be significant, and I believe that Greenbelt development will not address the true problems behind Ontario’s housing crisis.

The primary benefit of this policy, which Premier Ford has stressed at length, is that Ontario has a housing shortage. He has promised to build 1.5 million homes by 2031, although currently, the province is not on track to meet that goal. Doug Ford has also made the case that because hundreds of thousands of immigrants are forecasted to come to Canada in the next few years, housing availability must increase in order to house these new Canadians. Ford has said that as many as 300,000 immigrants could be headed for Ontario, which means housing development must increase. However, most immigrants will not be looking to buy brand-new single-family homes, to buy any property at all, until at least two or three years after they arrive in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

### **Environmental Concerns**

Premier Ford’s plan has been relatively unpopular among Ontarians, with major concerns being centred around the issues of environmental degradation and urban sprawl. The GTA is already a large region with low population density relative to comparable cities. Because of its large surface area relative

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Gee, “Why Doug Ford’s broken vow on the Greenbelt’s future matters.” *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 26, 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-why-doug-fords-broken-vow-matters/> (Accessed Mar. 13, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Fatima Syed, “Immigrants are not the reason Ontario’s Greenbelt is being developed,” *The Narwhal*, Feb. 25, 2023, <https://thenarwhal.ca/ontario-greenbelt-immigration/> (Accessed Mar. 13, 2023).

to its population, citizens of the GTA spend far more time in cars than in other comparable cities, causing air pollution. Further, the surface area of land that is paved with concrete and built over is significant. Concrete is an incredibly damaging substance, causing immense levels of air pollution and water use throughout its manufacturing process. Plus, when new regions are developed, it is poured onto valuable land, destroying fertile topsoil and innumerable ecosystems.

Land conservation is an incredibly important element in preventing severe climate change and protecting biodiversity. This is why the federal government is planning on protecting 30% of national lands by 2030, and why the Government of Ontario first established the Greenbelt in 2005. So, many citizens are disheartened to see these important long-term considerations seemingly ignored by the provincial government. Though Premier Ford has stressed that more land will be added elsewhere, resulting in a net increase of the Greenbelt's surface area, it is important to remember that not all land is the same. The Greenbelt horseshoes the massive GTA, creating an environmental barrier. This region provides natural water filtration, saving municipalities billions of dollars annually, filters and cools air near urban areas, and protects against flooding. Further, the Greenbelt naturally offsets 71 million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year, and its 750,000 acres of productive farmland produce locally grown food. If it wasn't for this source of agriculture, even more of Ontario's food supply would have to be shipped from elsewhere, causing even more environmental pollution as well as a decline in the overall prosperity of the Canadian agricultural sector.

The Greenbelt also protects biodiversity, including dozens of species at risk for extinction. The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve is one of the regions that has been opened up for development, which is of particular concern as it is adjacent to the Rouge National Urban Park. The park is home to 1,700 species, 42 which are at risk for extinction. Construction and development would be devastating to this region and pose a clear environmental risk to all species in question because of air and water pollution throughout construction, as well as the long-term impact of having urban sprawl move closer to natural habitats.

## Consultation and Negative Feedback

In keeping with his statement that Premier Ford governs “through the people,” his government conducted a thorough 30-day consultation with constituents before moving ahead with the plan to develop the Greenbelt. The Government of Ontario moved ahead with the policy only ten days after the consultation period ended, completely ignoring the feedback their consultation received, which was “broad opposition to any removals or redesignation of lands under the Greenbelt Plan.” They noted that they received negative feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including Indigenous groups, environmental organizations, and municipalities such as Toronto, Mississauga, Hamilton, and Brampton. Interestingly, the Government of Ontario’s website also noted that many people “asserted that additional land is not required to meet Ontario’s housing needs. Although affordability was identified as a key priority for many, some respondents asserted that densification in existing urban areas and the development of explicitly affordable housing should be the preferred approach to increasing housing supply.”<sup>3</sup> Premier Ford has said this development is part of a broader policy to build more homes, increase affordability, and house Ontario’s incoming immigrant population, but as their consultation noted, the homes being built are not designated as affordable housing and will be unlikely to house many new immigrants. So, what is the benefit of this policy for Premier Ford and the Government of Ontario? Its extreme unpopularity is not even questioned by the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party, as evidenced by their media releases. Media coverage has been generally negative, with headlines dominating Ontarians’ news feeds about Doug Ford’s potential conflicts of interest and the horrific razing of Ontario’s natural beauty. As many have stressed, homes could be built elsewhere, such as within land recently designated for development in other municipalities. So, why is Doug Ford following through with this plan?

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<sup>3</sup> “Decision on proposed redesignation of land under the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.” *Government of Ontario*, Dec. 21, 2022, <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-6218#comments-received> (Accessed Mar. 5, 2023).

## **Does Doug Ford have a conflict of interest?**

Premier Ford has come under fire for potential connections to developers who will benefit immensely from Greenbelt Development. Developers were among attendees at his daughter's \$150-a-ticket "stag-and-doe" pre-wedding event, which is traditionally used by couples to fundraise for their wedding. This has led Premier Ford to be investigated by Ontario's Integrity Commissioner and raises the question of whose interests are being taken into account with regard to Greenbelt Development, as the land cleared for development by the Ford government is already owned by developers. The De Gasperis family, a family of developers, owns 32 properties in three of the locations the province is planning on opening for development. 28 of these properties (in Pickering), which are owned by seven companies under the control of the De Gasperis family, were purchased for \$21.5 million, and all but four of these properties were purchased before the creation of the Greenbelt. The properties bought after the Greenbelt's protection were purchased for \$1.7 million in 2016 and \$7.9 million and \$3.5 million in 2020. According to Elections Ontario and the lobbyist registry, the De Gasperis brothers have hired lobbyists and donated significantly to the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario in the past. They have been battling to develop this land for years. Much of the land in Pickering was purchased before the creation of the Greenbelt with the goal of turning it into subdivisions, but the institution of the Greenbelt in 2005 by Premier Dalton McGuinty's government created a major hurdle for them. In 2006, Silvio De Gasperis told the Toronto Star, "McGuinty has already hurt me. Now I'm going to hurt him." In the years that followed, the wealthy family campaigned against the Greenbelt and even unsuccessfully took their issue to court. It seems as though finally, the tide has turned, and under Premier Ford, the Government of Ontario has shifted towards increased friendliness towards developers' interests.

## **Housing Shortages - Not for lack of land**

Canada and Ontario face a housing crisis with challenges beyond the issue of land availability. According to Jane Fogal, City Councillor for Halton Region, there is enough land already designated for

development in Ontario for 2 million homes, which is much more than the goal Doug Ford has laid out, which is to build 1.5 million homes. Ontario already has vast stretches of undeveloped land across its municipalities, land availability is not our primary issue, and land protected for environmental reasons is not the cause of the housing shortage. The fault lies more so with a weak construction sector. There are one million vacant construction jobs in Canada, and many of the delays within the housing construction sector are due to this massive labour shortage. An aging population is causing a spike in retirees in the skilled trades workforce, and with low numbers of youth and immigrants heading into work in the construction sector, there are simply not enough workers to build houses fast enough.

Further, the Ontario government's Housing Affordability Task Force found that flawed zoning laws are the primary issues contributing to the housing crisis. For instance, 70% of developable land in Ontario can't absorb projected population growth because large amounts of land are dedicated to single-family homes. Low-density development projects like single-family housing combined with a slow-moving construction sector are causing the housing shortage, not a lack of land. Thus, the Greenbelt development will not solve the fundamental problems contributing to Ontario's crisis, and the environmental degradation will have been for nothing.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that there are clear environmental dangers to this plan, and the benefits for housing would have to be much more significant to merit this development. However, housing benefits are minimal as plenty of land that could be developed already exists in and outside of the GTA. The housing crisis stems from zoning flaws and construction sector weaknesses, not a lack of land. Further, Premier Ford has concerning personal connections to developers who stand to be the biggest benefactors of developing the Greenbelt, which makes it difficult to believe that the interests of Ontarians are central to this policy.

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