

Bill 23: The Red Herring Solution of Ontario's Housing Crisis

When the American economy crashed in 2008, Ontario's markets experienced a steep decline alongside it. Although not as severe, the recession impacted Ontario's housing market deeply, with houses that were usually being sold for \$175,000 dropping all the way down to \$118,000. From that point on, housing prices have been increasing to a concerning point where, in 2015, the prices of houses had increased by 15%, and in 2017, housing prices increased by 34%. Ontario has been plunged into a housing crisis that has not yet been solved yet. However, many organizations and people have presented several options.

The most recent one is Bill 23, proposed by Doug Ford's government. Bill 23, or the More Homes Built Faster Act, officially became law in November of 2022 and has been met with both intense criticism and acclaim by the public. The bill states that, if the land on Ontario's Greenbelt is used for housing, 1.5 million housing units could be built in that area within ten years. These 1.5 million homes will be built in 29 different municipalities, and despite the backlash the government has faced, they have stuck by their decision—even overriding the local governments of Hamilton and Halton Region to turn protected land into homes. The Greenbelt includes greenspace, farmland, and wetlands, consists of 800 hectares of land, and spans 325 kilometers, from Oak Ridges Moraine all the way to Niagara river. Concerns include the already existing space within urban boundaries in all of these 29 municipalities to build homes, the devastating environmental impacts of getting rid of crucial greenspace, and who this bill truly benefits—the people of Ontario or the developers. Ford's government is standing firm in their decision, and although few amendments have been made to appease the municipalities, the concerns still stand.

One of the main points of contention regarding Bill 23 is the fact that Doug Ford states that there is no more land to build upon within urban boundaries, nor is there enough time to build affordable housing in those boundaries due to excessive costs from the municipality itself. An opinion piece written for the Toronto Star by Dave Wilkes, the president of the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD), says, “Currently, it simply takes too long to get building approvals, and it is too difficult to add gentle density. On top of that, new home buyers are unfairly burdened with escalating government fees and charges. Bill 23 addresses all of these challenges” (Wilkes 2022). The Canadian Real Estate Magazine’s Richard Lyall writes in an article, “Circumstances have changed since the Greenbelt was created. Boundary lines were never intended to be written in stone forever and adjustments have been made under different governments” (Lyall 2022).

However, a report released by former Waterloo Community Planner Kevin Eby in February of 2023 reveals that there is more than enough space within the Greater Golden Horseshoe to build a minimum of 1.5 million homes—the report revealed that it is actually possible to build 2 million housing units without ever stepping foot in the Greenbelt. The report states that there is enough space including already built-upon areas and rural areas within the 29 municipalities, to build 2 million housing units. In fact, there is more than enough space and resources within BUAs to increase the rate of construction compared to the current rate. Eby has also written the following in his report:

“The housing crisis currently faced in Ontario relates to both supply and affordability.

Housing having access to transit within the BUA has the potential to help resolve both these issues... There is no indication this can similarly be achieved through construction of more low-density dwellings in car dependent greenfield areas.” (Eby 2023, 9)

This means that housing that has access to transit is the answer to both supply and affordability issues, not housing that has access to greenfield.

The More Homes Built Faster Act not only addresses concerns regarding already existing space to build upon but also those of severe environmental consequences. The Narwhal states that Ford's plan is to essentially reallocate the areas of the Greenbelt they use for construction: "The idea, the province says, is that it can drop some pieces of the protected area and add other, bigger pieces to make up for it" (McIntosh 2022). However, environmental activists say that it is not that simple. According to Ontario Nature, Bill 23 proposes to get rid of the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, which will abolish crucial policies that protect natural heritage sites and agricultural systems, and all the efforts made to reduce urban sprawl and fund more accessible transit. Getting rid of the Growth Plan will lead to a considerable loss of farmland and livestock. Bill 23 also proposes to eliminate the power of Conservation Authorities and remove integral foundations that prevent flooding and consequences of severe weather events. The housing sector is already the second most responsible entity for greenhouse gas emissions in the province, contributing to 23% of Ontario's rising greenhouse gas emissions, second to transportation (Drescher 2022). Poorly regulated housing that is built faster rather than better will have devastating impacts on the environment, especially when it is built upon designated greenspace that sustains biodiversity and environmental equilibrium.

The largest, most important concern, however, comes from Ontarians themselves—who truly benefits from Bill 23? The province's housing crisis does not just stem from the decrease in construction, but also from a lack of affordability and accessibility to transportation. Over 50% of households aged 25-34 in Ontario are renters, which is due to the fact that houses are too expensive for the younger generations to buy. 70% of households who make less than \$20,000

annually rent rather than buy. 30% of all Ontario households are renters (Homeless Hub 2018). Recent immigrants also tend to rent more than buy, as it is already costly just to enter the country. The housing crisis has a larger, more severe impact on young people, people with lower incomes, and recent immigrants—for these three demographics, single-family, detached homes in the Greenbelt that lack access to public transportation, affordability, and proximity to metropolitan areas will not be helpful (Syed 2023). It was discovered by Ontario's own housing task force that zoning laws are the issue, not a lack of space when it comes to the housing crisis. Most municipalities are ready to welcome immigrants with new housing within their boundaries, but these wouldn't be single-family homes—they would be apartment buildings, townhomes, and condos that can fit more people on the same plot of land (Syed 2023). Ford's plan of building single-family homes in the Greenbelt will not satisfy new immigrants, young people who are looking for their first home, or those with lower incomes.

One can try to be as impartial and objective as they would like when it comes to Bill 23—regardless of public response, it is a solution to Ontario's housing crisis. However, I believe that it is the wrong solution. Doug Ford has stated repeatedly that it is every Ontario resident's dream to "have a white picket fence" and a house that one can call home, and while this might be true for some, I dream of living in a community that is environmentally safe, sustainable, affordable, and inclusive for all, regardless of population density. I want committees and programs in place that protect my family and me in the case of an environmental disaster. I want to know that the province I live in takes care of its greenspace, its forests and its farmland. Bill 23, the Build More Homes Faster Act, might build homes faster, but not in a way that is environmentally conscious or inclusive. Building land on the Greenbelt is redundant, as there are spaces available in all 29 municipal boundaries, with accessible and affordable transportation

options, it has severe consequences for the environment (consequences that will soon take their toll if Ford continues to eliminate pockets of nature), and it is not a sustainable solution that can help people currently affected by the housing crisis, nor the residents of the future in Ontario.

I am about to enter university, which will be fulfilling but costly, and then I want to go to law school and pursue a law degree, which will cost even more. I have heard horror stories about people sacrificing proper food and winter clothing to afford a roof over their heads in Ontario, and many people my age are aware of the fact that, for most of us, owning a home might be an impossibility. Bill 23 should bring hope alongside jobs and houses to the future generations of Ontario, but it seems like Ford and his government have already decided who this bill is really for and who it truly benefits, and that is not the people who face the brunt of the housing crisis. To mitigate the ongoing housing crisis, we need to pay attention to affordable housing for the youth, immigrants, and financially challenged sectors of society by producing housing options with more population density, in existing or planned transit corridors, upon which we can expect that all Ontarians will be able to afford a home they can call their own.

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