

The Pros and Cons of the Ontario Government's Proposal of Housing Development in the Greenbelt

In November 2022, Ontario Premier Doug Ford and his government revealed that the green light has been given to his plan for the development of housing in the Greenbelt—a project that received such intense backlash in 2018 that it was almost immediately reversed (Syed et al., 2023). The public heavily disapproved of this plan—and vocally so—for the main reason that the Greenbelt is the world's largest protected conservation area, and the implications of harming a natural habitat for urban development could spiral. Yet, at the same time, the housing crisis in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) quickly grows out of control and begs for a solution. In its current state, the market begs for a solution.

Location Matters

Currently, 77% of all immigrants to Ontario move to Toronto (The Canadian Press, 2019). With this constant stream of population increase in the GTA come ballooning costs and fierce competition for housing, where the demand outweighs the supply significantly, driving up costs out of the range of affordability for most. With the proposed Greenbelt plan comes 50,000 new homes and the hope that more homes will reduce the strain on the market (CBC, 2022). Some argue that it is necessary to expand on the Greenbelt, being our only option to build within the GTA, as expanding development outwards towards suburban areas brings a host of problems. In these areas, families are segregated from each other, as well as from the city, forcing dependency on long commutes in the car. These neighbourhoods are also dominated by cul-de-sac street patterns that discourage even walking or biking (Brody, 2013). In the city of Toronto, however, dependence on cars is declining while more and more residents rely on public transportation. Since 2006, the number of people in the GTA using public transportation to get to work has increased by 7.7%, and in 2017, made up 37% of all commuters (Spurr, 2017). Additionally, development in the Greenbelt increases the population density of the GTA, which is positive for its own

reasons. The cost per household of maintaining infrastructure is always lower in high-density areas, and potentially easier to control. Urban sprawl, or expanding outwards, away from the city, leads to many single-family homes in low-density areas, driving up the burden of maintaining infrastructure on a single household greatly. Note that suburban homes are forced to bear the cost of suburban roads and utilities themselves, just as city-dwellers should not be expected to funnel taxes into utilities for suburban areas. Development in the Greenbelt provides an urban boundary and increases density in a metropolitan center, allowing both the benefit of a lesser burden on taxpayers and an increase in the use of public transportation systems, directly benefiting the environment (Greene, n.d.).

The only way to avoid the negative impacts of urban sprawl is by development in areas such as the Greenbelt. In reality, more than enough land has been made available to Ontario to build more housing. The province has enough land to build 2 million units by 2031, without ever touching the Greenbelt (DeClerq, 2023). It's not so much a shortage of suitable land that's the issue, but its location. The GTA lacks suitable and compact housing such as duplexes, townhomes, and low-rise apartments due to issues with zoning in the past, contributing to the problem we now face in the present. As a result, we're going to need 1.5 million new homes in the next 10 years in order to return the market back to a healthy state (Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force, 2022). Bill 23, recently passed by the Ford government, aims to end exclusionary single-detached zoning, which will discourage urban sprawl, reduce segregation and pollution, and act as one step forward toward reaching enough affordable housing (Mollenkamp, 2022). But these bills don't come into effect overnight, and in the current day, supporters of the Greenbelt development will argue that building homes, fast, is the answer.

The Imperfect Solution

Building more houses is akin to waiting for a broken market to fix itself. It's not just more homes that we need, but rather, more affordable homes. In 2022, Toronto became the most expensive city in

Canada (Carapetian, 2023), where 75% of renters who earn less than \$50,000 per year spend more than 30% of their income on housing (Toronto Foundation, 2019). Since the pandemic, the average price of a home in Toronto is now 10 times the average income in the city (Alini, 2021) and has more than doubled in just 10 years, since 2010 (O'Neil, 2021). When taking affordability into account, development in the Greenbelt may do more harm than good. For one, the cost of building on greenfield sites is greater than intensifying already existing urban areas. Developers are motivated to build more expensive houses, as it benefits their companies directly, driving up market prices, and having little effect on actually solving the problem of affordability (Herald, 2022). Secondly, in the GTA, around 80% of the land serviced for development is unused, and remains so, as they are predominantly far from the centre of the city. 80% of GTA residents claim that they would trade a large home and yard for a location-efficient neighbourhood and 70% claim they live where they do because of affordability, not preference (RBC, 2013). An extremely competitive market exists for housing that is located close to city centres, land on the Greenbelt being just that.

The Effects on the Environment

Like all ecosystems, every part of the Greenbelt plays a vital role in maintaining the balance of a grand network. If even a part of it is disrupted, the entire system tips. The land proposed to be used for development from the Greenbelt include prime farmland, provincially significant wetlands, land dedicated to preserving biodiversity, and regulated floodplains (McClern et al., 2022).

Farmland makes up a large percentage of the Greenbelt's land and allows for local food and supports rural economic development. As the Greenbelt is so close to many urban centres, the costs and distance of transporting food to these areas are reduced, directly benefiting the environment (Pasioka, 2022). Furthermore, agriculture in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, one region of the Greenbelt, provides

almost 59,000 jobs to the economy and generates an estimated \$4.1 billion in GDP (Greenbelt Foundation, 2023).

The Greenbelt is also a safe haven for endangered species (McIntosh et al., 2021). Interrupting a natural area not only means a destruction of history but also rampant wildlife loss, as it disrupts routes of movement for animals and water (Pasioka, 2022). Loss of biodiversity, in turn, reduces genetic variability, which can have drastic effects on an ecosystem for centuries to come, as it decreases species' ability to survive and adapt.

Additionally, the construction of roads and buildings on natural land unaccustomed to them changes natural drainage patterns, particularly how runoff is displaced. This poses a threat to the purity of drinking water accessed by millions in the US and Canada (Purdue University, n.d.). Wetlands are also vital to our urban centers, as they regulate and direct the flow of water throughout a landscape, preventing floods and, simultaneously, becoming an invaluable resource during droughts (Pattison-Williams et al., 2023).

Furthermore, although the Ford government claims that the 7,400 acres of land in the Greenbelt to be used for development will be swapped for 9,400 acres elsewhere, its impact on preserving environmental protection is minimal. Some of the swapped lands, for example, include urban river valleys, which are already protected from development through other policies and become a redundant addition. What's more, other proposed land disregards the fact that we must not only consider what is protected but what surrounds it, as well. Recall that the connectivity of animal and water movement are vital to the preservation of an ecosystem (McIntosh et al., 2023). With the green light given to a plan as large and significant as this one, a precedent is inevitably set for future development on preserved land, which can potentially send shock waves of damage to the environment. Already, four other landowners are asking to build on other areas of the Greenbelt.

Real Solutions Don't Come Easy

I believe that development of housing in the Greenbelt is a necessary, albeit temporary, solution. As the housing crisis in the GTA continues to grow out of control, the plan will alleviate at least some stress on the market while more stable solutions are developed. It is vital that we implement long-lasting and robust policies along with the execution of this development, instead of relying on pumping the market full of more housing in the future. We can begin by correcting our mistakes in the past, which led to a lack of mid-sized compact housing. More social housing units must be built as it discourages urban sprawl and a domino effect of more plans which involve building on natural, protected land.

The Greenbelt plan disregards long-term and irreversible effects on the environment, which my generation will be tasked with solving. However much I believe it is needed, I disagree with the manner in which environmental concerns were exchanged for a quick-fix medicine to a problem that has prevailed for years. Moving forward, the entire situation raises a dangerous question regarding the extent we are willing to go for the economy and the sacrifices we will make in the process.

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