

# More Houses, Less Habitat

By Bob Barnett

It is ironic that just as Canada was hosting thousands of delegates from all over the world in December 2022 to discuss measures to better protect our land and species, the Ontario government was proposing to remove 7,000 acres of protected Greenbelt land. Granted, they were talking about replacing it with 9,000 acres in the Paris Galt Moraine, which, however, is doubtless already designated for protection. Bill 23 and associated measures have several pretty serious measures, all in the name of building more houses more quickly:

- 1) Removal of 7,000 acres, almost 28 sq km, from the Greenbelt;
- 2) Encouraging the sale of conservation authority (CA) lands;
- 3) Removing the power of CAs to comment on development plans;
- 4) Expanding municipal zones where housing would be permitted;
- 5) Removing the right of citizens to comment on matters before the Ontario Land Tribunal;
- 6) Giving Ontario mayors the power to decide housing matters with only 1/3 council support;

- 7) Allowing mayors to veto outright, motions limiting housing;
- 8) Eliminating municipal development charges worth billions of dollars used to pay for servicing of land;
- 9) Dramatically reducing the funding for the Niagara Escarpment Commission;
- 10) Even removing the listing of heritage buildings to prevent substantial change.

If these measures were destined to provide high density housing on land serviced by roads, sewers, transit and employment, it would be a noble endeavour. Instead, sprawling subdivisions will cover these newly-designated housing lands which are farmland and forest beyond the edge of current housing, selected and purchased by developers. That will not only remove the services nature provides in those areas, like cleaner air, water, less flooding, carbon sequestration, pollinators, habitat for important species, tourism and recreation and even aesthetic values, but will replace it with roads and pollution from cars. Just seeing trees and nature has been demonstrated to reduce health costs.

If the selected 7,000 acres are grazing land, the loss of

nature's services is at least \$1 million per year, but if forested lands are being removed, we lose \$12.6 million each year from those natural services listed above EVERY year thereafter. That value includes only the Greenbelt lands, not CA lands or other municipal lands removed from protection.

## Losing Species in Ontario

The irony is that these measures were introduced just as the world looked to Egypt for solutions to our climate crisis. Then the world's view shifted to Montreal where 198 counties strove to find ways to protect 30 per cent of our land before 2030. Eminent biologists like E. O. Wilson calculate that we need not 30 per cent, but 50 per cent to prevent the sixth great extinction which is going on right now, mainly through habitat loss. We don't just lose species in the jungle in Brazil, but right here in Ontario where hundreds of species are under dire threat.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture calculates that we are losing over 300 acres of farmland every day. We need the cropland to grow things locally. Otherwise, we have to truck, ship or fly things in from all over the world at great ecological cost. We need to minimize our CO2 from transportation.

One of the things that started me on the road to conservation was visiting the Bruce Trail where every month, I saw new fields being converted to subdivisions in Brampton and St. Catharines. That pushed me to start

looking for land to get the Trail off roads and into the forest. That morphed into Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy where, after 25 years, we are conserving 20 properties this year with 13 sq km worth about \$10 million. We are the second biggest land conserver here in southern Ontario with 21,300 acres, or 86 sq km, protected. Despite our struggles, all the land trusts, CAs and governments have only protected 4.3 per cent of our land, not 20 per cent and certainly not the 30 per cent we are aiming for.

In December, the federal government announced four new Indigenous protected areas, covering a million acres, to protect caribou and a few other threatened species. We need this kind of help in southern Ontario's hotbed of rare, endangered and threatened species as well. Every acre protected here will protect scores of species. Building Highway 413 and stealing land from our Greenbelt will only make species more vulnerable. But that's just an externality to Doug Ford's friends. They want more back yards and lawnmowers. Just yesterday I drove by a succession of signs announcing more new development in Brampton.

The loss of 7,000 acres in the Greenbelt, building Hwy 413, losing municipal and conservation authority lands will mean we have a steeper, higher hill to climb than we did before. Southern Ontario with its most intense species diversity has only reached 1/7 of the 30 per cent international goal. The graph here, based on information from the United Nations Environment Programme, shows where we sit compared to other countries. Ours is a poor start when the rest of the world is at 14.6 per cent or half of the global goal.

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