

# Farmland to Sprawl

## *Ford Government Defies Public Response, Removes Greenbelt Lands From Protection*

BY DOREEN NICOLL

In November 2022, the Ontario government passed Bill 23, More Homes Built Faster Act as part of their strategy to build 1.5 million homes over the next decade. To meet that goal, the Ford government proposed significant amendments to the Greenbelt Act. Yet the mandate of this act, and accompanying plan, is to permanently protect from development, agricultural and environmentally-sensitive lands in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

During the 30-day consultation period, close to 20,000 comments were submitted. By the government's own admission, these comments overwhelmingly opposed any removals or redesignation of lands under the Greenbelt Plan. The summary of comments emphasized that numerous submissions asserted that the proposal was contradictory to the vision and goals of the Greenbelt Plan and requested a full withdrawal of the proposal. Concerns were voiced over the lack of transparency and scientific process around the identification and evaluation of proposed removals.

Overall, environmental groups were unsupportive, citing concerns for the environmental impacts of the proposal due to the role the Greenbelt plays in addressing climate change. The home

building industry supported the proposal, maintaining it would contribute to increasing housing supply.

Public consultation resulted in no changes to the original proposal. Despite the overwhelming lack of support, on December 21, 2022 the provincial government passed all amendments.

Lands in the Niagara Escarpment area that have been removed from protection in the Greenbelt Area include:

- Land located in the City of Hamilton south of Garner Road West, west of Fiddlers Green Road, east of Shaver Road in the vicinity of Book Road
- Land located in the City of Hamilton south of White Church Road East, west of Miles Road, north of Chippewa Road East, east of Upper James Street
- Land in the Town of Grimsby south of the GO rail line, west of Oakes Road North, north of Main Street West, east of Kelson Ave North
- Land located in the City of Hamilton at 331 and 339 Fifty Road

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Over 88,000 urban acres are available for housing starts within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. Instead of utilizing development-ready lands, the government removed 7,400 acres of protected Greenbelt land, replacing it with 9,400 acres elsewhere to build 50,000 homes within the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Mike Marcolongo, coordinator of Keep the Greenbelt Promise Campaign, reminds people that we all need to build more efficiently and smartly. "That fight for the Greenbelt is also about the fight for the Escarpment because the Escarpment is a key ecological corridor in the Greenbelt," he says.

The Greenbelt provides a buffer for development around large sections of the Niagara Escarpment. Carving off sections will diminish natural animal and plant corridors forcing these species up the Escarpment. Fragmenting agricultural and natural landscapes by removing thousands of acres undermines the protection of wetlands, woodlands, rivers, streams and wildlife habitat.

The trend under the Conservative government is that any wetland under two hectares in size doesn't deserve protection from development. Bill 23 takes that even further by eliminating the endangered species criterion that would

previously have protected a wetland from development.

"We're going to start seeing applications to pave over the smaller wetlands even if they are part of a larger complex," says Mike.

Government policy means developers could destroy ecological features as long as the feature is recreated elsewhere or the developer pays a fee in lieu of habitat reconstruction. Historically, this approach has been unsuccessful because wetlands connect to the existing natural groundwater system unique to that area. Likewise, replacing a 200-year-old Eastern White Cedar or old-growth forest with newly planted trees falls far short of replicating the antiquity and environmental significance lost to development.

### **Housing Needs**

Ontario welcomes hundreds of thousands of immigrants every year. The government needs to recognize the majority of those needing housing want to be in established areas with solid public transit and essential services.

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When Hamilton held a referendum in 2022, Hamiltonians resoundingly said no to sprawl. The provincial government recently ripped out sections of Hamilton's official plan that accommodated new builds within the urban boundary, replacing it with sprawl legislation requiring more aggregate for roads and infrastructure.

Grimsbey council voiced concerns over two parcels of land that lost Greenbelt designation. Their quota of 7,000 homes could be accommodated without using lands the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority identified as floodplains.

Alliance for a Liveable Ontario wants to stop provincial government messaging and emerging policies that undermine environmental protection of the Niagara Escarpment. The non-partisan group represents hundreds of thousands of Ontarians from diverse sectors including agriculture, housing, academia, urban planning, environmentalism, and labour.

"Bill 23 makes it easier for developers to bulldoze natural areas and farmland and turn it into sprawling neighbourhoods which we frankly don't need," says Franz Hartmann of Alliance for a Liveable Ontario. He maintains that building large, expensive homes will not address the housing needs of Ontarians, but will lead to the destruction of farmland, natural areas, and even the Niagara Escarpment.

"You get to a tipping point where there just isn't enough land available to maintain the biodiversity that we need," he adds.

Biodiversity loss is one of the consequences of Bill

23 which Phil Pothén of Environmental Defence asserts the Ford government has packaged as somehow relating to housing supply. In-house counsel and Ontario environment program manager with Environmental Defence, Phil says the net effect of Bill 23 will be to produce fewer homes in more expansive forms and in places where the overwhelming majority of Ontarians say they don't want to live.

According to Phil, "There are a small number of real estate investors with outsized political influence who have spent decades stockpiling land that ought to remain forever off-limits for anything other than farming or natural heritage." These land owners convinced the government to confer billions of dollars of unearned value on them by designating their property as development land.

Those developers alone benefit from the Ford government's push to sprawl that threatens the spectacular Niagara Escarpment and the flora and fauna who call it home.

*Doreen Nicoll is an award-winning social justice and human rights writer and editor. Her articles have appeared in over 20 publications across Canada and internationally. Reach her at healinggaia@yahoo.ca or doreenhnicol.wixsite.com/portfolio.*

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## Committed to Protecting the Greenbelt



**SANDY SHAW**  
MPP HAMILTON WEST—ANCASTER—DUNDAS

[SShaw-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:SShaw-CO@ndp.on.ca)



**SARAH JAMA**  
MPP HAMILTON CENTRE

[SJama-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:SJama-CO@ndp.on.ca)



**MONIQUE TAYLOR**  
MPP HAMILTON MOUNTAIN

[MTaylor-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:MTaylor-CO@ndp.on.ca)

