

# Concerns **FOR THE** Greenbelt Remain

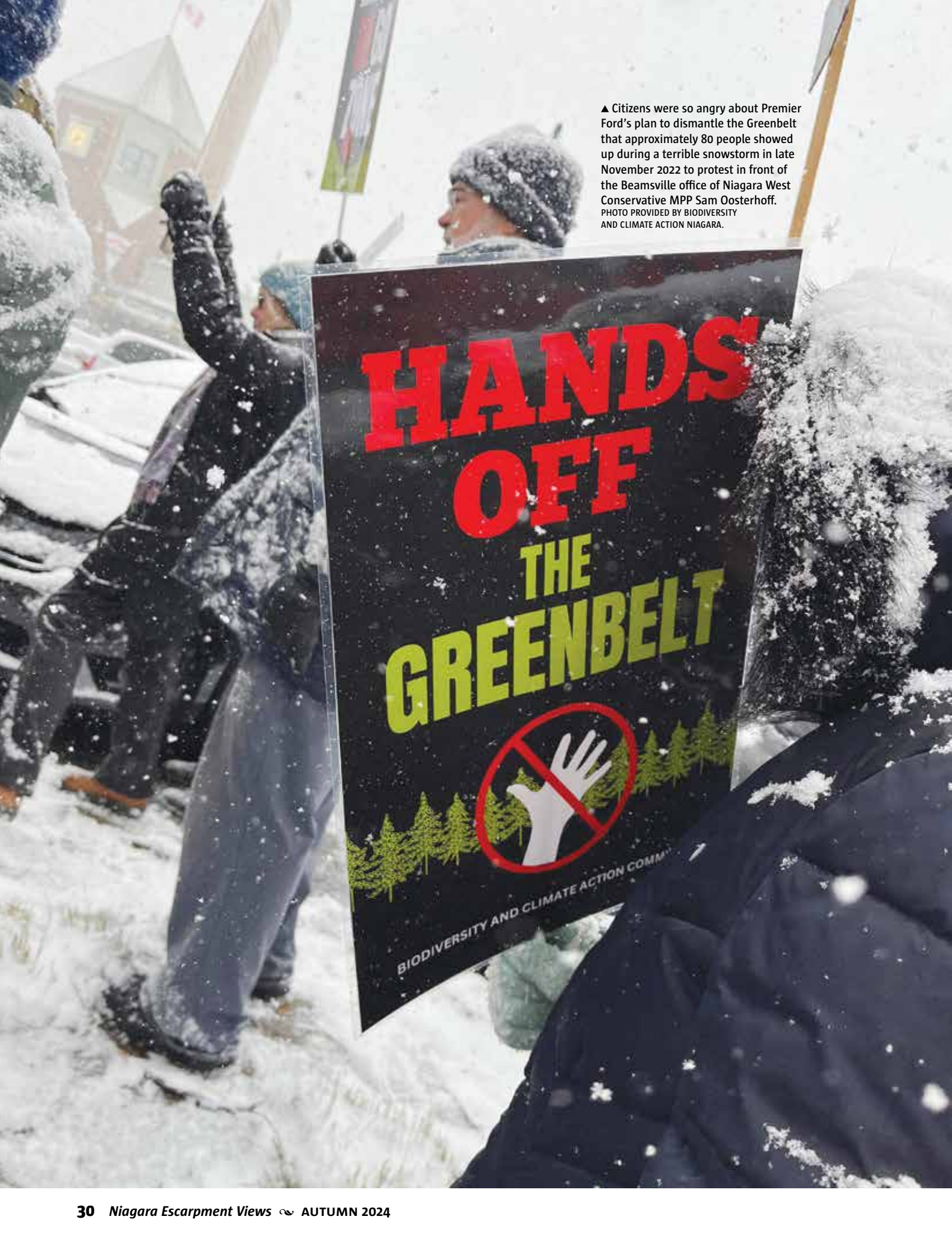
WRITTEN BY DAN O'REILLY

A silent protest by Greenbelt supporters greeted Premier Doug Ford at the official opening of the new Markdale Hospital last September. Out of respect for the opening, there was no yelling or shouting, says protest organizer Dave Meslin. PHOTO BY DAVE MESLIN.



**A**t a Progressive Conservative caucus retreat in Niagara Falls last September, Premier Doug Ford made an apology for his government's attempt to remove out of the Greenbelt, 2,995 hectares of land across 15 sites. That policy reversal came in the wake of months-long intense and increased citizen opposition across wide swaths of the province, including along the Niagara Escarpment from Niagara Region to Hamilton, to Milton, and north to Markdale. Residents wrote letters, signed petitions, and rallied in often cold, miserable weather, holding a mix of homemade or professionally crafted "Protect the Greenbelt" signs. Many people believe that Ontario needs more Greenbelt protections.





▲ Citizens were so angry about Premier Ford's plan to dismantle the Greenbelt that approximately 80 people showed up during a terrible snowstorm in late November 2022 to protest in front of the Beamsville office of Niagara West Conservative MPP Sam Oosterhoff. PHOTO PROVIDED BY BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE ACTION NIAGARA.



▲ In mid-December 2022, members of Biodiversity and Climate Action Niagara held a Requiem for the Greenbelt candlelight vigil along King Street in Beamsville. PHOTO PROVIDED BY BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE ACTION NIAGARA.

“The Conservative government doesn’t care about protests in Liberal or NDP ridings, but they do care about what happens in ridings they hold.”

**B**iodiversity and Climate Action Niagara (BCAN), a collective of 23 groups and more than 100 individual residents, held numerous rallies across Niagara Region which attracted anywhere between 70 to 100 participants, says BCAN chair Liz Benneian.

Citizens were so angry about Premier Ford’s plan to dismantle the Greenbelt that approximately 80 people

showed up during a terrible snowstorm in November 2022 to protest in front of the Beamsville office of Niagara West Conservative MPP Sam Oosterhoff, she says. A few weeks later, on the evening of December 20, BCAN members and supporters returned to Beamsville to hold a “Requiem for the Greenbelt” vigil along King Street.

Those rallies were “the public face of all the work that was going on behind

the scenes with allies across the province to thwart the provincial government’s destructive plan,” says Liz.

Other initiatives, less obvious to the public, included meetings with Sam Oosterhoff who, to his credit, agreed to those meetings. There was also an intensive letter writing campaign to Premier Ford and all PC MPPs, plus Prime Minister Trudeau and Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Steven Guilbeault.

### Federal Protection

“We encouraged them (Trudeau and Guilbeault) to use every lever at their disposal to protect Greenbelt lands,” says Liz, referring to areas where the federal government does have jurisdiction, such as protecting federally listed species-at-risk.

In the Orangeville area, retired social worker Sharon Sommerville launched the locally-based Keep Your Greenbelt Promise Dufferin-Caledon. It was part of the much larger Keep Your Greenbelt Promise, an umbrella of similar organizations whose work was funded by the Small Change Fund, which also paid for the purchase of 9,000 signs.

Sharon’s organizational drive began in the living room of her Mono Township home when she invited a few concerned friends and neighbours to a meeting.

“We started a mailing list of the 10 or so people in attendance and so we began.” By the word “began”, she is referring to initiatives such as staffing a table one Saturday a month at the Orangeville Farmers’ Market. Volunteers collected names on Save-the-Greenbelt petitions and passed out Keep Your Greenbelt Promise signs. “We reached hundreds of people on those Saturdays.”

The Dufferin-Caledon group also secured an almost-\$2,000 anonymous donation to take out a full-page advertisement in both the Orangeville and Caledon Citizen newspapers. The advertisements called on Premier Ford and Deputy Premier and Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones to restore Greenbelt protection.

### Pivotal Encounters

A frequent visitor to the

market, MPP Jones must have felt the heat. For the most part she made a point of studiously avoiding the group until one Saturday.

“One of our team members asked her if she would like a [Save the Greenbelt] sign. Her husband kindly said, ‘No, thank you,’ and then Sylvia yelled at us and said the government had added thousands of acres to the Greenbelt. Of course, those lands were already large protected in deep valleys that weren’t developable,” says Sharon.

In the struggle to save the Greenbelt, the encounter was the first of two pivotal moments for Sharon. The second occurred in mid-September 2023 at the International Plowing Match in Laurel, just north of Orangeville. The Dufferin-Caledon members and other protestors raised signs when the Premier and MPP Jones started speaking. They also witnessed the frosty reception Ford received from farmers and other attendees.

A few days before the plowing match a demonstration of a different sort occurred in Markdale. Approximately 150 to 170 people held a silent protest shortly before the community’s new hospital was officially opened by the Premier.

“There was no yelling or shouting out of respect for the hospital’s opening. Hospital officials were informed in advance. We remained on the street, didn’t enter the hospital grounds, and left before the official opening. It all came together rather quickly and attracted people from all political stripes,” says organizer, author, and Eugenia resident Dave Meslin. Considering that Markdale is in the Bruce-



▲ Trish Keatchie, left, and Sharon Sommerville of Keep Your Greenbelt Promise Dufferin-Caledon. PHOTO BY DAN O'REILLY.

Grey-Owen Sound riding held by Conservative MPP Rick Byers, the large turnout was significant, says Dave. “The Conservative government doesn’t care about protests in Liberal or NDP ridings, but they do care about what happens in ridings they hold.”

### Rural PC Ridings

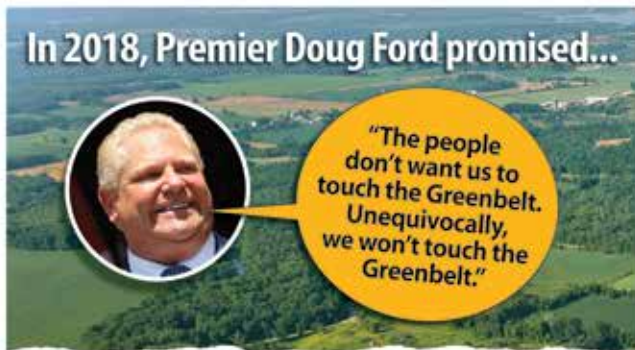
Targeting rural ridings, whose residents tend to vote Conservative, as well as swing ones, was a key strategy of the Greenbelt Promise, says its former campaign manager, Mike Marcolongo. “That tactic seemed to have worked as witnessed by the media articles

that spoke to the Niagara Falls Ontario PC retreat where MPPs seemed to have spoken out and rebelled in spades.”

Judging by the comments made by Mike and others interviewed for this article, the battle against the provincial

*Continued on page 35.*

The battle against the provincial government's environmental policies is far from over.



On December 8, 2022, **Premier Doug Ford and government MPPs from across Ontario broke that promise.** They voted for legislation which removes protections from the Greenbelt's Duffins-Rouge Agriculture preserve and are passing further legislation which weakens or removes Greenbelt protection. 7,400 acres have already been cut from the Greenbelt and opened to wealthy developers.

By exposing these areas of the Greenbelt to development, Premier Ford and government MPPs have put **the entire Greenbelt at risk of further damage.** Although politicians do break promises, commitments to protect the Greenbelt are a special kind of promise. **Everything is at stake.**

Please email, phone or visit MPP Sylvia Jones. Deliver her a powerful message...

**Restore protection of the Greenbelt NOW!**

[GreenbeltPromise.ca](http://GreenbeltPromise.ca)

▲ As part of its efforts to fight the Greenbelt cuts, the Keep Your Greenbelt Promise Dufferin-Caledon group was able to obtain an anonymous donation to take out this full-page ad in the June 8, 2023 editions of both the *Orangeville* and *Caledon Citizen* newspapers.

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▲ Halton Hills Climate Action is just one community group with concerns about the Greenbelt, including stopping sprawl and saving farmland.  
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

► Spotted in Ancaster.  
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



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government's environmental policies is far from over. While the Greenbelt battle against the carve outs was won, the province is still pushing ahead with its proposed Highway 413 and Bradford Bypass. Those highways could cut through the Greenbelt and the Greenbelt Promise will continue to fight those projects, says Mike.

For its part, Biodiversity and Climate Action Niagara remains concerned about the loss of farmland and the detrimental impacts of sprawl development.

"Along with our allied groups across the province, we are committed to continuing to fight against the Ford government's anti-environment agenda and for good planning policy," says Liz Benneian.

"The successful campaign to force Premier Doug Ford to reverse his decision to give developers access to the Greenbelt was a watershed moment in Ontario," says Small Change Fund's campaign and engagement vice president, Mike Balkwill. "Sadly, Premier

**"The successful campaign to force Premier Ford to reverse his decision to give developers access to the Greenbelt was a watershed moment in Ontario."**

Ford appears to have learned little from this experience."

Mike Balkwill is not alone in believing that an agenda of more urban sprawl, more highways, and more destruction of farmland, wetlands, and forests, continues to be advanced by the Ontario Government. Ontario needs more Greenbelt protections in more

communities around Ontario and vigorous grassroots campaigns will continue to be necessary to protect "the places we love, and to ensure a livable future for the next generations," he says. **NEV**

*Dan O'Reilly's last feature for this magazine was "Battling Erin to Save West Credit River," Autumn 2023.*

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