

New map reveals development plans will 'destroy' Ontario's Greenbelt

By Mark Pavilons

The release of a map by a leading environmental group has shocked and outraged residents and politicians.

The Ontario Greenbelt Alliance (OGA) released a map highlighting the potential harmful impacts of more than 650 requests, by developers and municipalities to the Ontario government, to remove land from Ontario's protected Greenbelt.

The map pinpoints just one-third of the 650 requests made by developers, land speculators and municipalities to remove protected lands from the Greenbelt. Just a fraction of the total requests, the portion mapped is almost 11,000 hectares (27,000 acres). The map also shows existing towns and villages in the Greenbelt that could be ringed with more sprawl subdivisions if developers get their way.

'Every Ontarian who values clean drinking water, local food, protected forests, farmland, rivers and wildlife provided by the Greenbelt should be very concerned by developers and speculators trying to pave over the Greenbelt with costly and outdated sprawl,' said Lynda Lukasik, executive director of Environment Hamilton. 'This new map makes it clear that many in the development industry see the Greenbelt as a target for sprawling subdivisions and highways and are trying to pressure the province to give into their demands.'

The land removal requests came forward through the provincial government's review of the Growth Plan and the Greenbelt Plan - a review aimed at improving the laws passed to permanently protect agricultural and natural lands and promote smart development in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

'Removing land from the Greenbelt piece by piece would be the exact opposite of what Greenbelt farmland, forests and rivers need - permanent protection. Developers don't need more land, especially in the Greenbelt,' said Erin Shapero, Greenbelt and Smart Growth program manager, Environmental Defence. 'There is already a huge amount of land available to develop: in the GTHA alone, there is more land already approved for development than the size of Mississauga and Oakville combined. The Premier must ask why developers insist on paving over the Greenbelt instead of developing lands already allocated for future growth?'

More than two thirds of all removal requests come from York Region, where land speculators and municipalities are seeking to remove roughly 7,500 hectares of land from the Greenbelt, including prime farmland, natural areas along highway corridors and sensitive areas around the headwaters of important creeks and rivers, including the Rouge and Don which flow to Lake Ontario, a source of drinking water for millions in southern Ontario.

'York Region is where the Oak Ridge's Moraine Plan and the Greenbelt Plan were born. In the early 2000s, development pressures, gridlock and rapid destruction of farmland and sensitive ecosystems forced the province to act to protect these important landscapes. The fact that developer pressure is being applied here again speaks to the land speculation that continues to happen as part of the development industry's attempt to hoard land in the Greater Golden Horseshoe Region,' said Sony Rai, Director of Sustainable Vaughan.

'With climate change bringing more extreme weather and floods we should be protecting more of our vital headwaters and green infrastructure, not paving over them to satisfy the greed of land speculators,' added Jim Robb, President of Friends of the Rouge Watershed.

'The Premier has a clear choice: protect and expand the Greenbelt and build healthy and sustainable cities, or favour developers and urban sprawl at great public expense in terms of increased traffic gridlock and taxes, and increased damage to our health and quality of life,' said Jack Gibbons of the North Gwillimbury Forest Alliance.

According to King's Ward 5 Councillor Debbie Schaefer, the review of the Conservation Plans and the Growth Plan has been under way for over 18 months now. Except for those who have really got engaged by attending the public consultations, reading the draft amended plans it has been a fairly 'arcane exercise.'

'Public surveys show over and over that a large majority of people appreciate the Greenbelt and are happy to know that the land is being protected so that food can be grown locally, that important water sources are protected and that there are available places for great outdoor activity. I think that these people will be shocked, perhaps outraged, to see the extent to which the Greenbelt is threatened.'

The map clearly shows how vulnerable the Greenbelt is and how it can be seriously damaged without anyone knowing.

The red dots shown are only 1/3 of all the requests to the Province to take land out of the Protected Countryside. This is land which has been protected to date as that is where our food is grown, where there are headwaters for rivers which ultimately are drinking water for 250,000 people.

Schaefer pointed out there are at least 20 requests from land owners in King Township to take 520 hectares out of the Protected

Countryside.

She noted it's 'shocking ... as if a veil has been ripped off and you can now see clearly what is happening.

'And I am appalled that any of these requests would be granted without quality public consultation. The public should not have to comb through the Environmental Registry to find requests in order to communicate concerns to the Province.'

In addition, the proposed amended Growth Plan includes a new opportunity for sprawl. It proposes that towns and villages in the Protected Countryside such as Schomberg and Nobleton can be expanded as part of a Municipal Comprehensive Review.

'Two things trouble me with this. First there is the apparent acceptance that boundaries are no longer considered fixed. And I am troubled that expansion could be approved without Provincial Review. Given what the Greenbelt is about I think it is wrong that individual municipalities would have that control. The Greenbelt is not in place to serve any one municipality; it is about conserving land where food is grown and protecting sensitive eco systems for those far beyond a specific municipality. Expanding the boundaries for Schomberg and Nobleton should not be left to the discretion of King Township Council and York Region.

'Every property owner who has made a request to have lands taken out of the Protected Countryside is lobbying the Province to approve their request. And they will be lobbying the Province to ease the hurdles for expanding towns and villages.'

Greg Locke, of Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT) said they're in agreement with the OGA's concerns in this matter and 'we encourage the public to have their say on the Province's input period until Oct. 31. The map is quite telling.'